Reciprocity

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Reciprocity

by ThePeak

Summary

“Raphael,” she said gently. “I know it’s difficult for you to use the past tense-”

“It’s not difficult, it’s just wrong,” Raph growled. He couldn’t look at her. This was the thing. The thing that made everyone look at him with pity. Like he was defective or broken. Like he was some stupid idiot who couldn’t get with the program.

But it was everyone else who was wrong. Raph was the only one who was living in reality.

“Leo. Isn’t. Dead.”

_____

It's been two years since Leo's disappearance. The city has erected a monument in Bryant Park to honor and mourn New York's bravest young hero.

While Leo's statue sits in the park, Raph sits in therapy. Everyone believes Raph is too traumatized, too wounded to process the loss of his brother.

But there's something Raph can't explain, something only he can feel, something everybody wants him to ignore. It whispers softly somewhere in the deepest corners of his mind: *he's still here*.

Raph listens.

[non-canon compliant with Tales of the TMNT. Written pre-release of Tales]

Chapter 1: Never Getting Out of Here

Chapter Notes

> There's a LOT of cursing coming up. This takes place 2 years after the events of Mutant Mayhem, and Raph is a very angry 17 year old who's having a *very* difficult time. I promise there's a reason he's developed such a bad habit of it, which will be revealed later in the fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*artwork by @_Burger_sauce_*



Raph picked at the frayed fabric on the arm of the chair.

“I know this is a tough week for you, Raphael.”

Tough? Exams were *tough*. Finding clothes that fit over his shell was *tough*. Tuning out Donnie’s constant anime rambling and Mikey’s stupid jokes was *tough*.

This week, though? This week wasn’t tough; it was fucking *excruciating*.

It was the same thing as last year. Everyone had stopped looking him in the eyes for days already. Lunch with his buddies was tense, everyone trying way too hard to make jokes that fell flat. Dad wouldn't even be in the same room with Raph if he could help it.

He remembers some of the platitudes people had offered him before the *first* anniversary. *It'll get easier. It won't always feel this way. Time heals all wounds.*

But now coming up on two years, he knew it had all been bullshit. Time wasn't healing this wound. Every single day seemed to rip it open just a little bit more, and Raph felt like it had become the city's collective mission to rub salt in it as often as possible.

"Your father says you've been taking the sewers to go to school."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't need to walk past a mural with his face on it every other fucking block. I swear, I'm *this close* to ninja-ing out there at night and painting over all of 'em."

"I understand that seeing them is hard. People grieve in different ways, though. Covering up their memorials might make *you* feel better, but that would hurt a lot of people by taking away the way they've chosen to grieve."

"Why the *fuck* do they get to grieve? He was *my* brother."

Raph's stomach lurched.

"*Is*. I mean *is* my brother."

"Raphael," his therapist said gently. "It's alright. That was good. I know it's difficult for you to use the past tense-"

"It's not difficult, it's just *wrong*," Raph growled. He couldn't look at her. This was his *thing*. The thing that made everyone look at him with pity. Like he was defective or broken. Like he was some stupid idiot who couldn't get with the program.

But it was everyone *else* who was wrong. Raph was the only one who was living in reality. He alone had accepted the truth; a truth he now rarely vocalized. It's what wound him up in therapy in the fucking first place, and it was clear by this point nobody was ever going to change their mind.

But fuck it, he was already here, and they weren't letting him quit anytime soon. So why not say it for the millionth fucking time?

"***Leo. Isn't. Dead.***"

It had been a while since he'd last said it out loud. Raph had concluded that if he couldn't convince anyone, he could at least convince them he wasn't crazy. He would never outright *agree* that Leo was dead, but if he stopped shouting it at every opportunity, *maybe* they'd back off. *Maybe* they'd stop treating him with kid gloves. *Maybe* they'd let him stop coming to these sessions every other fucking week.

Raph realized now this had been a huge mistake. His little verbal mix-up was proof. He didn't believe Leo was dead and he never would, but it was clear that playing along in any capacity was starting to mess with his head. When he'd first started therapy, he'd had dark suspicions that this was some form of brainwashing; that if this woman used the right tricks, she'd make him forget what he knew was real.

After two years of sessions, he now knew this wasn't the case. Dr. Hart *truly* believed Raph was just a traumatized, delusional kid who couldn't accept that his brother was dead. She genuinely wanted to help him recognize and process his grief. Raph felt a little guilty about it sometimes, knowing she honestly wanted to help him.

In many ways, she really had helped him. They didn't talk *exclusively* about Leo. One of the very first things they'd worked on was Raph's anger. Raph needing therapy for his "rage problem" had always been a joke, until suddenly it wasn't. He knew that out of all the creatures in the animal kingdom, turtles weren't exactly the most aggressive or violent, but Raph had never felt more fucking feral than he had the first few weeks after Leo was gone. It had taken everything he had to not just tear into all those fucking morons offering their *condolences*.

It was when he finally *did* snap and got physical with his buddy Tim that Raph had wound up at Dr. Hart's practice. Tim had forgiven him immediately, and being a fellow member of the wrestling team, his friend hadn't been hurt or even rattled.

But the damage had been done. The school administration wasn't going to let Raph return to campus unless he was being seen by a professional for his "understandable but unacceptable expressions of grief." Raph's assertions that it wasn't grief, but *frustration* that everyone was just *completely fucking insane* really hadn't helped.

Raph still hadn't looked at Dr. Hart, instead watching a leaf outside fall from its branch and drift with the wind. Autumn had rolled in fast. Two years ago was the first autumn they'd been free to move about the city in daylight. Without the cover of buildings and rooftops, it had always been difficult to visit Central Park growing up. So as soon as the colors had started to change a few months after their acceptance by the humans, Leo had insisted on a family day at the park to enjoy the "fall vibes".

It had all felt a little too Hallmark-y and Pumpkin Spice Latte-ish to Raph at the time. He'd rolled his eyes dramatically when Leo made them all stop for hot cider from a dumb little hipster food truck, but looking back now, it's almost like his brother knew this would be the last happy memory his family would have of him.

For now, at least. Once Leo was back, Raph was going to make damn sure they had *way fucking more* disgustingly picturesque days like that. Overpriced cider and all.

Raph could hear Dr. Hart readjusting herself in her chair. She was good, *too* good at times, but this was one of her very few tells Raph had picked up on. His therapist often physically shifted in time with her redirection of the conversation.

"Tell me again why your dad grounded you and your brothers that night you saw the outdoor movie together," she said with convincing interest, as if Raph hadn't just said the very thing she'd been working on for two years to get him to *stop* saying. Sometimes Raph wondered if she ever regretted taking him on as a patient.

"He was pissed that we stayed out too long," Raph said, chuckling despite himself. He finally looked at Dr. Hart, who somehow looked both amused and unimpressed.

"I remember you telling me something a *little* less superficial than that," she chided gently with a raised eyebrow. "About him being afraid."

Raph knew where this was going. He'd walked right into Dr. Hart's trap. Why couldn't he ever fucking *learn?*

“He said he was afraid to lose us because we’re all he had, and all he’d ever have.”

“But he didn’t know there were other mutants out there. And now he does. He has nieces and nephews now, a wife.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Raph snorted.

“And he has human friends now,” Dr. Hart continued, glossing over Raph’s slight on his stepmom. “He goes to mahjong nights with humans. He and Scumbug go to the public gardens with their human gardening club. You and your brothers will always be the most important thing he has, but you’re no longer the *only* thing he has.”

God, here it fucking comes.

“And *you* have more than just your dad and brothers now. You have your friends at school. You have your wrestling teammates.”

It was true, sure, but that wasn’t the fucking point. She always said it like this, like having a bunch of new human friends meant Leo didn’t fucking matter anymore, like April and Tim and Jason and Faisal and Irma and Keno and whoever the fuck else at school could *replace* Leo.

Raph kept a lid on the sneer he felt rising and forced himself to say *something.*

“I’m not technically on the team anymore,” he mumbled.

The wrestling team had been the *best* thing about high school at first, but after a growth spurt earlier this year where he’d finally grown into his massive shell, he’d voluntarily left the team. It had been clear no human was ever going to stand a chance against him, not now that he towered above just about everyone else at school and could out-bench professional weightlifters with next to no effort. He’d taken on grown adult gangsters, a mutant rhinoceros, a fucking kaiju sized super-mutant, all *before* his growth spurt. It wouldn’t have felt very sportsmanlike to stick around on the mat, even if nobody was asking him to leave.

“But you still go to practice and matches to support your team. Most people wouldn’t want to watch others do something they loved but can no longer do themselves. And I think the reason why you still go is because your teammates matter to you. Your friends matter to you.”

The killing blow was coming, he knew it, and Raph couldn’t do anything to stop it from landing.

“For most of your life, you believed your dad and your brothers were all you’d ever have. Your dad meant well, but he reinforced this idea time and time again in the way that he chose to raise you. He taught you how to hide and fight as a defense mechanism against the threat of loss. Your childhood was spent avoiding something that inevitably came to pass, regardless of all these defenses. That’s at odds with what was essentially your entire reality for so—”

“Can…can we stop for a sec? I gotta—,” *fucking breathe.*

Dr. Hart complied, going silent while Raph dipped his head and closed his eyes to start a breathing exercise.

It had taken Raph months to admit it once the panic attacks started those couple years back. He’s not sure he *ever* would have told Dr. Hart if he hadn’t literally had one in her office. As fucking mortifying as it had been (and still was), Raph had to admit he was glad Dr. Hart found out. She’d given him plenty of techniques and ways to manage them, but nothing had worked better than the breathing exercises.

They seemed to come out of fucking *nowhere* sometimes. If he was lucky, Raph could feel them coming on long before they came crashing down. There had even been a couple of times he’d woken up with that impending feeling and decided to cash in a sick day to deal with them in the privacy of his own room.

More often than not, though, they hit him like a freight train with almost no warning. He’d excuse himself for the restroom and ninja his way up to the school roof, usually without a moment to spare. He’d prefer to forget the one that came on so fast and violent that he had to ride it out tucked behind the dumpster, unable to make it to the roof before everything from his brain to his feet had stopped working.

Sometimes he wished he’d just get angry and rage like he used to, but a couple months after Leo was taken, his explosions had been replaced by a tight chest and short breaths. Instead of seeing red, he saw things in tunnel vision. Rather than balling into fists, his hands shook.

This wasn't a serious one, though. Not one that would make him wish he'd just fucking pass out, or one of the ones that made him give April's legendary puke-cano a run for its money. It *definitely* wasn't going to be the kind that made his thumb hover over Dr. Hart's contact that he'd been given for emergencies.

(He'd never used it, and while he liked to think he never would, Raph kept it in his quick-to-access favorites. Just to be safe.)

In fact, he could tell this wasn't even going to even be a full-blown attack. It took a few moments of concentrated breathing for Raph to recognize that what he was feeling was actually overwhelming *guilt.* He'd gotten too lax, too comfortable. Dr. Hart wasn't brainwashing him, but Raph had started passively thinking in her's and everyone else's terms out of self-preservation.

It hadn't been long after starting with Dr. Hart before Raph realized that if he was going to ever get out of therapy before he turned 18 or graduated, he'd have to make some concessions. He hated, hated, *hated* giving any ground to anyone over anything. He and his brothers had worked so hard to make it into the human world, though. He'd lost his brother — for the time being — and he refused to lose anything else.

But if Raph didn't want to lose himself, if he didn't want to lose *Leo,* he needed to get serious again. No more slip-ups, no more passive compliance, no more "past tense". Leo was alive, and right now, Raph was the only one fighting to keep it that way.

He'd gotten *so fucking selfish.* That one little slip-up felt like an unforgivable betrayal of his brother. And for what? To have a slightly less uncomfortable time at school? To get out of going somewhere he didn't want to go every other week? Fucking pathetic. Honestly, he wished this *was* a nuclear-level panic attack. He *deserved* to feel like absolute shit for this.

But the breathing had worked, and Raph was leveling out. He didn't necessarily need to, but he kept going for a few more breaths.

Out of all of them, it was always Leo and Raph who were the most into martial arts. While Raph leaned more into the physicality of it, Leo had always been into the more spiritual side. Raph had teased him relentlessly when Leo started trying to learn how to meditate, but now Raph would take it all back the second he saw Leo again. It had taken a lot of work, *so* much fucking work, but he'd finally gotten to the point where he understood the appeal.

When everything was off the fucking rails, when everything just kept going so fucking wrong and there was nothing he could do about it, when Raph couldn't control what other people believed or thought about him, at least Raph could control *this* . He could control his breath. These were his lungs, this was his body, this was his mind. He was behind the wheel here.

And…well, Raph had another secret reason for gravitating so strongly to the breathing exercises. He would never tell anyone, not even Dr. Hart, but controlling his breath made him actually sort of…*feel* like Leo. Despite having no idea where his brother was, Raph never felt closer to Leo than when he just stopped to fucking breathe.

Sometimes it was nice to feel close to him, and sometimes Raph could swear it gave him Leo's sense of *conviction* . Raph had always been the most *confident,* sure. He was always the first to try something new. *He* took the first step towards Eastman High on their first day, while Leo trailed behind last.

When Leo believed something was right, though, he stuck to his guns and charged in full fucking tilt. This unwavering resolve had been *infuriating* growing up, because it had made Leo a little goddamn *snitch.* Raph could have been spared most of his lectures from Splinter if Leo hadn't been such a fucking goody-two-shoes. It was Leo who spurred them all on to fight Superfly not to be liked and accepted, but because it was the *right thing to do.*

Maybe in the past Raph would have been too proud to even consider it, but now he gladly leaned into this feeling. His brother wasn't here, but he could still lean on him, still find strength in what had ultimately made Leo the best of them. He took one last steadying breath and channeled all the patented Leo-fucking-nardo conviction he could before looking back up at Dr. Hart.

"I get what you're saying. I *swear* I fucking get it. I know I said a lot of shit when we first started, but I don't think this stuff is stupid anymore. I know…I know *you know* what you're doing," Raph said, forcing himself not to look away. God, she was so fucking honest and *nice* that part of him wished he could give her what she wanted.

He never would, though. Not while Leo was still out there, still *alive.*

"But I can't give up on him. I just *can't.*"

He was *never* getting out of here.

Chapter End Notes

This is an *in media res* story, meaning we're starting in the middle of things and details on what led up to this point will be slowly revealed.

Find me on Twitter here or on Tumblr here!
(I'm more active on Twitter!)

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!
(none for this chapter specifically, so here's some non-spoiler art based on this fic as a whole)

- Poster by @EllieSkellyArts Tumblr | Twitter
- Title art by @milovebisco Twitter
- Animation by @cheezthatboii Tumblr | Twitter
- Art by @lesbianardoo Tumblr | Twitter

Chapter 2: Therapy Isn't a Curse Word

Chapter Summary

> HEADS UP: I know “Implied Child Abuse” is a tag, but it is **not** from Splinter. There’s a line coming up that might make you think otherwise for a second, but there is **no** physical abuse from Splinter in this fic. Any abuse in this will be from canon bad guys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



“You almost ready, Raph?”

Mikey was yelling in the hallway. Raph was already dressed. He’d woken up early, already done his morning workout in the dojo and showered. Raph normally grabbed some breakfast in the cafeteria before homeroom, but knowing he’d really rather fucking avoid that today, he’d made himself some Eggo waffles and snarfed them down before anyone else would be up to find him in the kitchen. So physically, yes, Raph was ready.

Mentally ready, though? *Absolutely not.*

“Yeah, one sec Mikey!” Raph yelled through the door. He shuffled some stuff around in his backpack, desperately trying to delay the inevitable.

After his dine and dash waffle breakfast, Raph had quickly retreated to his room and tried very hard not to think about the day ahead. He had failed spectacularly.

Raph rarely took school for granted. They had wanted so badly to be accepted and have the ability to go to school, and they’d nearly died in the attempt. Despite how grateful he was that he and his brothers could actually go to Eastman High, he couldn’t help but look forward to weekends and holiday breaks.

He’d never felt so conflicted about the day a break before, though. On the one hand, this particular Wednesday was the day before the anniversary, meaning he’d be able to spend the actual day of it at home. On the other hand, it was *the day before the fucking anniversary*, which meant all the bullshit he’d already been dealing with for the past week would be cranked up to 11.

He was trying so fucking hard to be good today, almost entirely for his dad’s sake. Last year had been…well, Raph had seen drunken screaming matches on the subway that had been more civil.

Before last year’s anniversary, the angriest and most upset Raph had ever seen his dad was when he rescued them from TCRI. He’d been so furious that he’d single-handedly taken out a squad of TCRI baddies. His dad had *stabbed a guy in the face* through his helmet, and that was still absolutely *nothing* in comparison to last year.

Splinter had never, ever hit any of his children, and Raph knew he never would. Not outside of training, at least, where it was a necessary part of learning martial arts. Before Splinter’s age started to catch up with him and Raph was left with only his brothers as opponents, Raph had loved sparring with his dad. Raph had always been bigger than his brothers, even when they mostly caught up, but dad was a more equal match for him. Raph suspected his dad had always loved sparring with him the most, too.

So Raph knew how to take a hit from his dad, even if they’d only ever been in the context of training. Raph also knew he would have rather had his dad slug him straight in the fucking face than what’d he’d actually done.

“Stay here. I don’t want you to come.”

He'd said it softly, but it may as well have burst Raph's eardrums. He couldn't hear what his brothers said to him as they followed their dad out for the commemoration. They left Raph in the lair, alone in the overwhelming silence.

Raph's throat had still been sore from all the yelling in a last-ditch attempt to just get them to fucking *understand*, understand they were wasting their time with this pointless gathering when they should be out there *looking*. Leo was still out there, and his family and half the fucking city were returning to an empty grave to cry over someone who was still *very much alive*.

But he'd wasted his time. His throat was killing him for nothing. He'd gone to get a cup of water, but somehow ended up in their old room. It was the one they'd all shared until they started going to Eastman. With a whole crop of cousins suddenly moving in, they'd finally expanded into the surrounding areas of the sewer. With the extra ~~man~~ mutant power, it had finally been feasible to convert more sewer into livable space, and the boys had all gotten their own rooms. Leo had kept the old one for himself.

Raph wasn't sure if Leo offering to stay in the old room while his brothers got new ones was him being sentimental or selfless. The new rooms in the lair were significantly nicer. Now that they could go to the surface and shop, it had been easier to get higher quality materials. Raph's bedroom had drywall and an actual closet. He had an IKEA bedframe instead of a mattress on top of a pipe. Leo's room had hardly changed since it had all been all of theirs.

Raph's feet had carried him to stand before Leo's bed, still tucked into the arched alcove despite its owner having not occupied it for a year now. Raph had no idea how long he'd stood there, or when he'd sunk to the floor and begun to cry.

It was the one and only time he *hated* Leo for all of this. If Leo hadn't been so fucking good and noble and fucking *selfless*, none of this would be happening. Raph wouldn't be a fucking pariah at home, his brothers wouldn't look at him like he was a wild animal, people at school wouldn't treat him like glass, he wouldn't have to go to stupid therapy, and his dad…his dad wouldn't hate him. Raph wouldn't be so fucking *alone*.

When Leo left him, everyone else had, too.

Looking back at that day a year later now, Raph could hardly stomach it. His little pity party had been a real fucking wakeup call. The fact that he'd actually felt hatred for Leo made Raph want to shrivel up and die, even if it had been only for a minute. He knew that moment had to be his rock bottom, the absolute lowest he could ever let himself sink.

He'd talked about his breakdown more than once with Dr. Hart, and by this point, he'd worked through it. Most of it. He'd forgiven himself that momentary anger at Leo, but not for what he'd done to his dad. He still didn't think he was *wrong,* because Leo was 100% still alive, but he understood now that hadn't been the right time, place, or way to revisit the issue with Splinter. He wasn't sure things would ever go back to the way they'd been with his dad. They still talked. Sometimes. Kind of.

He would very much like to avoid talking to him this morning, though. Raph couldn't pussyfoot around in his room any longer, so he shrugged his bag onto his shoulder and headed out. He heard Mikey and Donnie in the main room, and what he hoped was the sound of dad's bedroom door shutting down the hall. Mostly confident that the coast was clear, Raph made his way to his brothers.

"I can't believe there's no waffles left for my breakfast pizza," Mikey was saying, forlornly looking into the open freezer.

"Weird, I thought we had some left," Donnie said, looking down at his phone.

Raph said nothing, but his brothers still looked up at him as he entered the room.

"Guess I'll just grab something in the cafeteria," Mikey said, shutting the freezer door and grabbing his bag. "You guys ready to head out?"

"Yeah," Donnie said, leading the way to the Lair's exit. Raph didn't answer, but followed.

They walked in silence for what would have been a city block or two as they headed toward their preferred manhole ladder. Raph could feel the awkwardness in the air, but kept his mouth shut.

"So," Donnie said dryly, breaking the silence. "You gonna be a raging douchebag again this year or what?"

"Donnie!" Mikey practically squeaked. "Dude that is *not* what we agreed on opening with!"

"Yeah, I'm not taking script notes from the improv guy," Donnie quipped, then looked back to Raph. "I'm serious though. Are you gonna be cool, Raph?"

“Yeah,” Raph grunted. *Stick to the plan. Talk as little as possible. Just get through the next 48 fucking hours.*

“Cool,” Donnie said with a definitive air. Seemed he also wanted to end this conversation quickly.

“Cool cool cool….cool,” Mikey echoed nervously.

God, not even out of the sewers yet, and Raph was already white-knuckling it. He let himself trail slightly behind his brothers to try taking a few steadying breaths without them noticing, but Donnie suddenly came to a halt.

“Wait,” Donnie said. He’d stopped walking, Raph and Mikey following suit. “Just wait a sec.”

Fuck, Donnie just couldn’t give Raph a break, could he?

“Look, I’m sorry.”

Well, that was *new*.

“That was a shitty thing to say, because I know you’re trying, dude,” Donnie said earnestly.

It was a little jarring to hear Donnie being so sincere. He had always been the most sarcastic of them all, and he’d only leaned into it more and more since Leo was gone. Raph would never, *ever* fucking tell Donnie how much he talked about it with Dr. Hart. It used to be mostly Leo who was on the receiving end of it, but now that he wasn’t around and Raph was a *persona non grata* in his own fucking home, he was Donnie’s new favorite target.

He hated how easily it got under his skin now. If it affected *him* this much, Raph would need to have a talk with Donnie to make sure he’d tone it down with Leo once he was back. Leo was just *way* more sensitive about this stuff; he would *not* be able to handle Donnie’s new Advanced Ragging. It used to be funny watching Leo squirm after a particularly good Donnie zinger, but now just the thought made *Raph* squirm.

“Well, uh…thanks,” Raph said, still slightly taken aback by this sudden about face from Donnie. “I *am* trying.”

“I know, that’s what I keep telling him!” Mikey said, visibly relieved that the temperature in the sewer seemed to have lowered. The three of them resumed their walk to school as Mikey continued. “Seriously, Raph, I hope you know we like, really *do* think it’s awesome you’re still working on stuff and going to, y’know…”

“*'Therapy'* isn’t a curse word, Mikey. You can say it,” Raph said, sounding a little more exasperated than he’d meant to. He didn’t want to kill the sudden and unexpectedly un-hostile vibe, so he clapped a hand on his brother’s head and gave it a playful, gentle shake. “I appreciate you guys not talking about it at school and stuff, but it’s cool when it’s just us.”

Mikey apparently took that as an invitation to launch right in immediately, making Raph wonder how long he’d been waiting for explicit permission to ask about it.

“So, what is this lady even like? She’s gotta be like, all brainy and dry. No offense, Donnie.”

“I dunno how many times I have to tell you that not all nerds are the same, bro,” Donnie chuckled. “I’m a *cool* nerd. Anime, video games, comics. She’s probably some lame stuffy PhD nerd. Bet she’s never even *heard* of BTS. Right, Raph?”

The last thing Raph had expected was for Donnie to show any interest in this conversation, and as awkward as it was, he found he kind of…appreciated it.

“She’s actually pretty cool, I won’t lie,” Raph laughed. “And I know for a fact she knows who BTS are because I told her you were into them.”

“Oh my gosh, you talk about us?” Mikey said, sounding genuinely touched. “That’s so sweet, Raph.”

“No it’s not, Mikey,” Donnie said flatly.

“What? Why not?” Mikey said, confused.

“Cuz Raph probably does nothing but talk shit about us to her.”

“Whoa, *what*?” Raph said, his turn to stop walking this time.

“C’mon dude, I’m not stupid. That’s what therapy’s for, complaining about your family and everyone else who makes you so fucking mad all the time.”

“Is…is that what you really think?” Raph said, hating how strained his voice sounded. “I *do* talk to her about you guys, but I don’t talk *shit* about you.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised you talk to her about us at all, because it kinda seems like the only brother you care about anymore is *Leo*.”

Raph’s breath caught in his throat. He knew his face was betraying his shock and hurt, but he couldn’t do a single damn thing to hide it. He floundered, grasping for anything, *anything* to say that might make Donnie understand how categorically *wrong* that was.

“It’s not…not like that. You guys are here. You’re okay. You don’t…you don’t need help. But Leo *does*.”

“No Raph, *you* need help,” Donnie said, rounding on Raph with a finger pointed in his face. “Clearly you’re not fucking getting *enough* help. I don’t care how cool you think that lady is; it’s been two fucking years and you’re still *just* as fucked up as you were when this all started!”

Raph’s vision began to tunnel. In a detached sort of way, Raph thought it was kind of funny. Here they were in a tunnel, and Raph was having tunnel vision. *Tunnel-ception*. He had to cling to his stupid little private joke to keep from falling apart right there. He didn’t respond. He *couldn’t* respond.

“Donnie, *dude*,” Mikey whispered loudly.

“No, I don’t *care,* Mikey. I’m so sick of his shit. I’m done.”

From somewhere a thousand miles away, Raph could tell Donnie had turned and kept walking. Mikey hovered, clearly torn between which brother to stick to.

"Just go," Raph managed to say. How was he even finding words right now? "I'll…I'll see you at school."

Mikey wavered for a few moments before turning and jogging to catch up with Donnie. Once again, Raph was alone.

Raph made it to school with a few minutes to spare. It probably hadn't gone completely unnoticed that he'd arrived without his brothers, but he couldn't focus on that enough to care. All he *needed* to focus on was making it through the school day so he could go home, crawl into bed, and never leave.

He was almost entirely on autopilot, but he began noticing something. Raph was surprised to find that more than a few people actually looked at him today. And not in a "*oh fuck he saw me staring, look away quickly*" way. A couple people actually said hi, or nodded at him as they passed in the halls. Tim had a full-blown conversation with him before Spanish class started, even though Raph was hardly paying attention to what he was saying or his own answers.

He wondered what the deal was until he caught a glimpse of himself in the locker room mirror before gym. Wow, he looked fucking *sad*. Maybe people thought he was one of them now. Everyone probably thought Raph had sorted his shit out and was finally sad about his 'dead' brother.

Whatever. He didn't need to ruin the illusion. They didn't need to know Donnie had stabbed him in the heart with a bottle rocket and lit the fucking fuse. His brothers thought he was fucked up. Not just confused or delusional. *Fucked up*. What's worse, they thought he didn't care about them. No wonder they hardly ever spoke to him anymore. Now it was obvious why they seemed to be hanging out with each other more and more, almost never bothering to include Raph.

This was one of those exceptionally rare times he actually wished he had a therapy appointment in the afternoon. But they were only every other Thursday, and seeing as tomorrow's Thursday was a holiday, Raph wouldn't get to talk to her about this for a while.

Did this warrant his very first use of Dr. Hart's emergency number? When he caught a glimpse of Donnie looking at him from the other side of the cafeteria before turning back at his own table of friends, Raph *seriously* considered it. How the fuck was he going to make it through the rest of the day and all of tomorrow now knowing what Donnie and Mikey thought?

But somehow, Raph was still in one piece by the final bell. He tried not to look like he was literally running out of the building. He just wanted to get home. He didn't want to see Mikey or Donnie or Dad. He dipped into the nearest manhole and into the safety of the sewers. His feet carried him home without having to think about it, having taken this route more often recently than he cared to admit. Before he knew it, he was back at the Lair.

It seemed empty, thank fuck. Dad didn't seem to be home, and he'd beaten his brothers. The other mutants mostly lived further into the Lair expansion, so unless they were hanging out in the main living room, it was hard to tell if they were there. Raph still hurried to his room, not wanting to chance it.

Raph didn't care how childish what he was about to do was. Nobody was here to see, anyway. He kicked off his shoes, crawled into bed, pulled the cover over his head. He curled up tightly and hoped that wherever Leo was, he didn't feel as alone as Raph.

Chapter End Notes


CLIP & COLLECT
RAPHAEL
RAPH LIKES TO BREAK THINGS.
IN FACT, HIS BIGGEST GOAL IS TO PUNCH SOMEONE SO HARD THEY THROW UP. BUT BENEATH HIS HARD HEAD AND TOUGH EXTERIOR IS A SENSITIVE TURTLE JUST LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO TALK TO.
WEAPONS: TWIN SAI
DREAM: TO BE A MIXED MARTIAL ARTS FIGHTER

"Guys, lay off ~~Nardo~~ Raph, he's sensitive."

Did I base half this fic *just* off of this Raph action figure box description? Maybe!

Chapter 3: You Wanna Talk About It?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



A few hours after getting home and cocooning himself in bed, Raph had forced himself to stop being the saddest sad-sack alive and get up. He went to his desk and sat down, opening one of the drawers. He kept some emergency snacks in here for nights just like this, when the idea of dinner with his family was less appealing than going another round with Superfly would be. He tried not to think about how pathetic it was to have an entire drawer stashed with food in order to avoid his family.

He was just finishing up a second bag of chips while watching some weightlifting youtuber's channel when he heard a knock on the door.

"Raph?" Donnie said from the other side. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," Raph said after a beat. Maybe Donnie was here to finish the job. Raph was just about ready to let him.

His brother opened the door and stepped in, looking like he wanted to be here even less than Raph did. Raph gestured toward his bed with his head, giving Donnie the green light to sit down on it. Donnie looked resigned, as if *he* wasn't the one who came here in the first place.

"Dude, I'm…I'm so fucking sorry," Donnie said, shaking his head a little as he sat down on Raph's mattress. "I flipped the fuck out on you, and you didn't deserve it. Not today."

Raph couldn't believe his ears. Donnie was apologizing…*again*. Raph felt the weight he'd been carrying in his chest dislodge. It was still there, but it was no longer pressing up against his lungs so hard that he could barely breathe.

Despite Donnie's apology, he couldn't tamp down the little rush of resentment he felt at that last part.

"Oh, but any other day is game, though, huh?"

"No, fuck, that's *not* what I mean," Donnie said, lifting his glasses up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I just…god, I am so bad at this."

"Y'know, if you wanna get better at talking about your feelings, I could recommend a good therapist," Raph said, eyebrow cocked. To his surprise, Donnie laughed until he had to wipe a tear from his eye.

"God," he said, readjusting his glasses. "I missed this."

"Missed what? You shitting all over me? You do that every day, bro."

"No, you shitting on me *back*. You *joking*. Just…fuck, just *talking*. You never talk to us anymore."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, you guys never talk to *me*," Raph said, wishing he sounded less hurt.

"Because it's like walking through a minefield with you, man! We never know when you're gonna explode!"

“Donnie, can you name a time in the last few months that I lost it on either of you? I’m serious. Just think about it.”

Donnie opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came. Raph watched the gears in his brother’s head turn, and felt a twinge of satisfaction when Donnie’s shoulders dropped.

“See? You can’t,” Raph said, tossing his hands up in frustration. “Because like you said before *you* were a raging douchebag, I *have* been trying.”

Donnie said nothing, and Raph found the resolve to keep going.

“What happened last year…I really fucked up. I let you and Mikey down. I know it would have been easier for you guys if I’d gone with you. And I know I really, *really* hurt dad…I thought I’d gotten a better hold on the anger thing by that point, but it obviously hadn’t been enough. So, y’know, I got super fucking serious about the things Dr. Hart was telling me to try. I put in the time, dude. I did the work. I’m not fucking perfect, but I can keep a lid on it pretty well these days. And I didn’t do all that for *me*. I did that for the people who’re stuck with me. I did it for *you*. You and Mikey and dad.”

Donnie shifted uncomfortably, but Raph continued.

“You shouldn’t have to live with a ticking timebomb in your own home…and…I dunno, it really bums me out you still think that’s what I am, and that all the shit I’ve been working on for the past two years was completely pointless.”

“…I am such an asshole,” Donnie groaned.

“Yeah, you are. I don’t have a monopoly on being a dick,” Raph said. A darker part of him wanted to leave it at that, but he couldn’t. He got up from his desk chair and went to sit on the floor next to his bed. He let his shell rest against the side of the bed, Donnie’s legs beside him. “But…you apologized and are actually fucking talking to me, so like…it’s cool, dude.”

“Gah,” Donnie huffed out a frustrated growl. He slid off the bed and sank to the floor, now sitting shoulder to shoulder with Raph. “I seriously am sorry, dude. I messed up. Stuff's just been like, so weird lately dude. You don’t even *know*.”

“You…wanna talk about it?”

“Wow, two years of therapy and that’s the best you got?”

“Donnie, listen…it’s kinda hard to have a real conversation about shit when you’re just constantly ragging on me.”

“Fuck, I know,” Donnie said, to Raph’s surprise. “I’ll...try to take it down a notch. It’s just hard.”

“I get it…seriously. I know it’s like, kinda your defense mechanism.”

“’Defense mechanism’? Really? I thought you were going to therapy, not vocabulary classssss*oh my fucking god* what is *wrong* with me?!” Donnie finished in a rush and grasped at the sides of his head with his hands.

“See?” Raph chided. “Not so easy just turning your shit off, is it?”

Donnie’s hands shifted to rub his face in annoyance, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Donnie groaned, face still in his hands. Raph’s inner alarm bell started to sound when Donnie went very still.

“I was also…” he mumbled from beneath his palms. “I was mad that you said Mikey and I didn’t need help.”

Raph couldn’t help his too-loud intake of breath at Donnie’s words. Donnie dropped his hands and sheepishly finally looked Raph in the eye.

Donnie looked tired. He looked *small.* When they’d been little, Donnie had been just about as tiny as Mikey, but gained a significant amount of height in their early teens. He’d always been on the thinner side, and Raph had definitely teased him a little too much as kids for him being ‘scrawny’. It had been a while, though, since Raph had looked at his brother and thought of him as…*vulnerable*.

Maybe if Donnie saw Raph as vulnerable, too, they'd finally have something in common again. Maybe if he showed a little trust in his brother right now, things could start getting better between them. Raph could recognize that this was Donnie reaching out, and as much as Raph dreaded it, this felt like the right way to reach back.

"I uh…" Raph started. Was he really going to tell Donnie this? It would be giving him some straight up *lethal* ammunition, but Donnie *had* said he'd try to stop dunking on Raph so much. He swallowed his pride and forced himself to continue.

"I get panic attacks. Like, pretty frequently, actually."

Donnie stilled. "Are…are you serious?"

"Wish I wasn't," Raph sighed.

"But," Donnie's eyes darted around, as if physically looking for words. "You're so *tough*."

The swell of pride Raph felt at those words was instantaneous. The fact that Donnie still thought he was tough despite going to therapy and having panic attacks? It was such a massive confidence boost that Raph couldn't help but grin.

"I know, I'm fucking hardcore," he laughed. "But I dunno man, I guess it doesn't matter if you're tough as nails, cuz nails can still rust."

"I mean, not if they're galvanized."

"What?"

"Galvanized nails, they have a zinc coating that prevents—"

“Oh my god, do *not* ruin my awesome metaphor with your stupid science crap you freakin’ nerd,” Raph said, playing up his annoyance as he shoved Donnie. His brother laughed and let himself fall sideways onto the floor. He giggled there on the rug until Raph offered him a hand, hauling him back up to sit shoulder to shoulder with Raph.

“I had no idea, dude. I seriously didn’t know,” Donnie said, sobering up after his giggle fit.

“That’s because I didn’t want you to. I didn’t want *anyone* to know. But Dr. Hart found out. I had one in her office and I thought I was gonna fucking die of embarrassment.”

Donnie looked just about as mortified as Raph had felt back then.

“But then she like, showed me all these ways to try and handle them, make them slightly less fucking awful. Sometimes now I can even kinda stop them from happening. I even, uh…was able to stop one this morning before it got outta hand.”

“This morning?” Donnie said, and Raph watched the realization hit Donnie.

“Oh my fucking god,” Donnie said, bringing a hand to his mouth. “Oh my god, dude. You froze and I just, *oh my god* I was getting out of there because I thought you were gonna blow up on me, I didn’t even *think*—”

“Donnie, dude, chill out,” Raph said, cutting Donnie off even though a small part of him was enjoying the payback. “It’s okay. I handled it, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine!” Donnie said, his voice going high and cracking “I’m the biggest fucking asshole on the planet!”

“It’s *fine*,” Raph said sternly. “Like I said, I took care of it. It wasn’t even a whole thing, I still got to school on time. And like, that’s kinda my point dude. I have ways to handle shit now. I could like… show you some of this stuff. Or tell you what to google if you’d rather look it up yourself or whatever. I mean, maybe we’re not like…dealing with the exact same thing here, but I dunno, this stuff might help.”

“I’ll, um,” Donnie started and stopped. Raph didn’t blame him for having trouble talking about struggling. “I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, no problem dude. I’m here whenever,” Raph said quickly. “And like…I mean that, for real. You and Mikey, you don’t need to be scared to come talk to me. I’m not gonna blow up on you anymore.”

“Yeah,” Donnie nodded. “Okay, yeah…thanks, Raph.”

They sat there in silence for a few moments. Something told Raph this wasn’t over yet, though. Donnie was putting off some seriously uneasy vibes.

“…Do you ever have dreams about him?”

“Yeah,” Raph sighed in response. God, he hated how little Donnie’s voice sounded. Raph looked over at him, hoping his expression was encouraging enough to get Donnie to continue.

“I had, I don’t know…” Donnie’s face was pinched. “I had this like, really vivid dream about him last night and it was weird and pretty fucked up, and I think it just put me on edge this morning or something so…y’know, I took it out on you.”

“I get it, Donnie.”

“And like,” Donnie kept going, his voice wavering more and more as he spoke. “I was freaked out because even though the stuff in the dream was so messed up, I was actually *mad* when I woke up because it was like…he was *right there*, but I woke up and if I’d just stayed asleep a little *longer*…”

Raph brought a hand up and grasped Donnie’s shoulder, squeezing and putting as much comfort into the gesture as he could.

“I miss him so fucking much,” Donnie said, voice thick. Raph felt a shudder run through his brother. He didn’t need to look over to know Donnie had started crying. It had been so long since Raph had hugged Donnie that he wasn’t sure it would be welcome, but the moment he turned to wrap his arms around his brother, Donnie’s face fell into the crook of Raph’s neck.

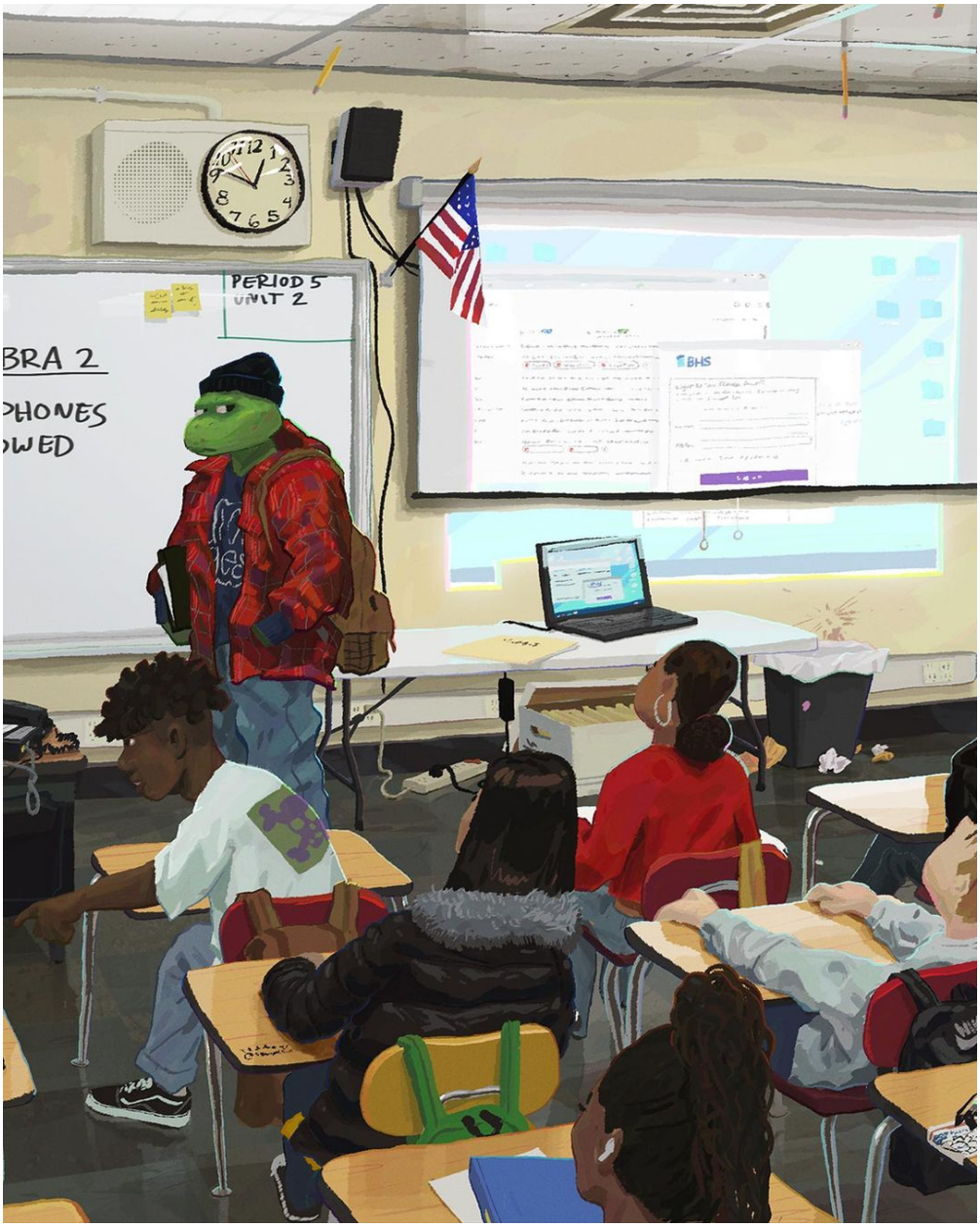
He let Donnie cry on him for God knows how long. The position on the floor was uncomfortable, but Raph would stay here as long as Donnie wanted.

"You seriously think he's alive?" Donnie asked quietly after a while, still holding onto Raph. "You… for real think he's out there?"

"Yeah," Raph sighed. "I really do."

"I wish I believed you," Donnie whispered into Raph's shoulder. Raph hugged him tighter. He wished Donnie did too.

Chapter End Notes



This early concept art by Garrett Lee was also a huge inspo for this fic. Raph just looks so sad and lonely!

AWESOME FAN ART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Art by @Pyracantha07wip Twitter

Chapter 4: Big Brothers

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: This chapter contains brief references to acts of terrorism.

For anyone outside of the United States reading this, Thanksgiving is an autumn holiday celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. It's usually celebrated with gatherings of extended family for a big dinner. A large department store chain called Macy's hosts the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City every year on Thanksgiving morning. (Canada also celebrates Thanksgiving, but in October)

Some families, like mine, usually watch the parade on TV as a Thanksgiving tradition. It lasts several hours and has floats, marching bands, giant balloons shaped like popular characters, and other entertainment. Celebrities ride on floats sometimes, either just "because" lol, or to sing/promote an album or movie or something.

Once again, I'd like to remind everyone that the "child abuse" tag is not referring to Splinter. He and Raph have a difficult and complicated relationship right now, though.

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph woke up early, enjoying a few moments of peace in his nice, warm bed before the realization hit him. It was Thanksgiving Day.

Fuck.

Thanksgiving had never meant the same thing to Raph's family as it did to most American families. Kind of hard to smuggle a whole ass turkey out of a grocery, ninjas or not. Dad had always viewed Thanksgiving as a particularly silly human holiday, anyway. Why dedicate an entire holiday to gorging yourself on expensive food when there was plenty of delicious trash out there for the taking every single day?

Splinter had only slightly warmed up to it when Raph and his brothers became obsessed with watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on TV every year. Watching it together was their one and only Thanksgiving tradition, the rest of the day spent just like any other day in the sewers. Inevitably, after years of watching what was happening on the streets just above their heads, the boys had begged their dad to let them sneak topside to watch.

"That is a terrible *idea, boys,"* Splinter had lectured so many years ago.

"But whyyyyy," little Mikey had whined. Thinking back on it now, Raph didn't think Mickey had gotten much better at counter-arguments.

"A long time ago, before you all was born," Splinter had explained gently, *"some very bad people did something terrible to the human city. A lot of people got hurt…a lot of people got killed."*

"Why? Why'd someone wanna do that? That's wrong!" Leo had said, aghast and indignant. The memory of it made Raph bristle, knowing what this little Leo's steadfast moral compass would lead him to someday.

"Sometimes," Splinter had sighed *"bad people think if they scare a lotta people, they make people do what they want. Hurting people, killing people…is a very good way to make people scared. It's very easy to hurt a lot of people when they all in the same place, like big tall buildings, or in a crowd watching a parade."*

Their dad pointed at the tv.

“You cannot see them because they are hiding, just like ninja, but the humans have people with guns. Snipers, they call them. They have very good aim, the best aim. They sit in high place and watch for bad guys, so all the people in the crowd can be safe and watch the parade. If a bad guy show up,” Splinter pointed his finger like a gun *“BAM! They shoot the bad guy before he do anything bad. They keep people safe. They do not want anything bad to happen again, not like before with the tall buildings.”*

“Why didn’t the snipers stop what happened before?” Raph had asked. He’d liked the idea of snipers. He already knew he had the best aim of all his brothers. He was way better than any of them at throwing ninja stars. Dad let him turn a pizza board into a target to practice. He wondered if he could be a sniper someday.

“Ah,” Splinter said awkwardly, running his paw through his then-thinning hair. “*Is a long story, boys. Very sad, too. I tell you when you are older.”*

Raph knew the story now. It was a critical piece of their history curriculum. He’d been to the Twin Towers memorial site himself now that he was free to move about the surface.

“If we go up there and get seen,” Splinter had continued. *“They might think we are bad guys.”*

“We aren’t though!” Leo argued.

“We aren’t,” Splinter agreed. *“But we are* different*. And remember what I say about the humans all the time?”*

“*They lust to murder that which is different from them; to interact with them is to die*,” the boys all said in chorus.

“Exactly!” Splinter had beamed at them, proud of his sons. *“Look, we can watch the parade here, and maybe next year, we actually do a big fancy meal like the silly humans, ok?”*

“Okay,” Mikey had said sadly.

Raph couldn't help but wonder what those sad little kids would have thought if they'd known that someday they wouldn't just get to *watch* the parade in person, they would be *in it*.

Now, though, there was no sense of urgency to get up and watch it. The excitement they'd once felt for the spectacle was gone. Before, Thanksgiving went uncelebrated because their family's need for stealth and isolation had made it impossible. Despite their newfound acceptance and freedom, a Thanksgiving turkey would never sit on the Lair's dinner table. None of them thought of today as a holiday, and they never would. For them, today could never be anything but *the anniversary*.

While much of the country would be gathering for meals, Raph's family would be preparing for a different sort of gathering. Tonight, after dinners with friends and families were finished, people from all around the city would descend on Bryant Park. For the second year in a row, a remembrance ceremony would be held for Leo. His life, his memory, his *sacrifice* would be honored there in the park, just blocks from where it had happened. Just blocks from the parade route, blocks from the last place he'd seen his brother, blocks from where the *attack*—

No, don't think about it, Raph told himself. He needed to get up, not slip into replaying the worst day of his entire family's life. He needed to get through this day without thinking about the sight of Leo's back getting *further* and *further* away from him—

Stop stop ***stop***, Raph thought viciously. *Be here now*.

When the jig was finally up and Dr. Hart had learned of Raph's panic attacks, something critical she'd taught him was in importance of *presence*, of existing in the current moment. It had seemed counterintuitive at first. After all, wasn't Raph here because of what had happened in the past?

Besides, Raph was already *great* at being in the moment. You kind of had to be to fight as well as he did. If you weren't paying attention in a fight, you were a goner. He really hadn't understood what Dr. Hard had meant until she elaborated.

"Presence can be situational awareness, yes. I know you have plenty of situational awareness. You're an excellent martial artist. But presence isn't just for fighting. It can keep us in the here and now. Your brain uses what's called a neural pathway to, simply put, transmit information. Your brain creates neural pathways based on past experiences, and these neural pathways become shortcuts for behaviors and actions. If I was to stand up right now and try to punch you, you'd be able to block it no problem. Why is that?"

"Uh…muscle memory?" Raph had asked.

"Yes, but it's not just your arms, is it? Your brain is a muscle here, too. Your arms know what to do because your brain does. You've developed those neural pathways in your brain from training, making it more or less effortless for you. You hardly have to even think if someone takes a swing at you, right?"

"Yeah," Raph had agreed.

"This can be a great thing for survival. Sometimes we create pathways for survival, but when the danger is passed and they're no longer needed, they remain anyway. Those old shortcuts can lead us to make choices that aren't appropriate for our daily lives. But when you make a conscious effort to be in the present, to ***be here now****, you can create new neural pathways, new shortcuts to new behaviors. You can rewire your own brain."*

Raph had largely ignored this particular little psychology lesson at first. He didn't need to rewire *his* brain, he needed everyone else to rewire *theirs*.

But the first time he had employed this technique to stave off a panic attack, desperately focusing on the things around him to keep from slipping into the fog of terror, he begrudgingly admitted that maybe it wasn't *complete* bullshit. The more he tried it, the more useful it became. It hadn't been long before it was one of his go-to inner mantras. *Be here now. Be here* ***now****.*

Raph needed to be here *now*, not at a Thanksgiving Day two years ago. He needed to be here now for himself *and* for his brothers. And not just his missing brother; Donnie had made it abundantly clear that Raph had two brothers right there in the Lair who needed him, too.

When Donnie had finally left last night, Raph had given himself a new assignment. He was going to *be there* for Donnie and Mikey. His brothers still thought he had the world's shortest fuse and had been avoiding him because of it; Donnie not pushing back when Raph had accused him of it had been proof. Raph would have to show them he had his anger under control. If that meant forcing his presence on them, then so be it.

Raph didn't want to make Mikey come to him like Donnie had. It was still early, and just like Raph, Mikey was an early riser. He figured if he headed to the kitchen for some breakfast, he'd have a good chance at catching Mikey alone. He didn't know what he'd say, but he needed to do *something* to make Mikey understand that Raph was here for him.

Sure enough, Raph walked into the kitchen to find Mikey staring into a bowl of cereal. It was an extremely boring breakfast by Mikey's standards, but judging by his hunched shoulders and pinched brow, Raph guessed Mikey wasn't up for making any of his usual wild culinary concoctions.

Raph busied himself with grabbing his own bowl of cereal while he tried to think of something to say. His train of thought had barely left the station before Mikey spoke first.

"Did, uh…did Donnie come talk to you last night?" Mikey asked awkwardly, failing miserably at sounding casual.

"Yeah," Raph said. "But I kinda think you already knew that."

"Yeah…" Mikey said softly. "I could tell what he said really upset you, so I might've…uh, forced him to go talk to you."

"Whoa, what?" Raph said, genuinely surprised. "Since when does Donnie let *you* boss him around?"

"Since you or Leo haven't been around to do it."

"Like Donnie ever listened to *me*."

"He did, though!" Mikey pushed back. "I know we don't like, *really* know who's oldest, but you *gotta* know me and Donnie always thought of you and Leo as the big brothers."

"I thought that was because we were just like, literally bigger."

"No!" Mikey said. "I mean, yeah, maybe at first! But you and Leo…I don't know, you guys always knew what to do. Donnie and I were always just sort of…following along."

Raph rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. They'd argued about it all the time when they were little, once they'd started to understand the concept of older and younger siblings. Splinter had tried explaining that they weren't like humans, it didn't work like that for them. But since all the tv shows

and cartoons they consumed growing up had put such an emphasis on big/little sibling dynamics, it wasn't all that surprising that they'd ended up categorizing themselves.

Raph would never say it to Leo's stupid face, but Raph had always thought of Leo as *the* oldest.

"And now that Leo…Leo's not," Mikey stopped. Raph's stomach lurched as he watched the tears well in Mikey's eyes. "Thought maybe you'd be the new leader, but…"

"Look, Mikey…" Raph started. "I'm really, really sorry you guys felt like you couldn't talk to me. Wait, no…that's not what I mean."

Raph collected his thoughts while Mikey scrutinized him. He'd talked about apologies with Dr. Hart, but they'd almost always been in the context of how he might approach apologizing to his dad. He'd still never found the courage to even try, but he remembered what Dr. Hart had said about genuine apologies versus empty ones. Raph needed to take responsibility for the mistake entirely and not put any of the onus on others.

Raph stood up and walked around the table to sit right next to Mikey. Raph angled himself toward his brother, his *little* brother, and put a hand on Mikey's shoulder.

"I'm sorry that I made it so hard for you to talk to me. You guys needed me, and I wasn't there for you. I think maybe that proves I'm not leader material, but I *am* here for you now, dude. Whatever you need, you can ask me. If something's ever bothering you, you can tell me whenever. Okay?"

Raph wasn't sure what he expected, but it certainly wasn't Mikey bursting into tears. His brother buried his face in his hands.

"I don't wanna go," Mikey whispered in a rush. "*I don't wanna go.*"

"Go? Mikey, what are you talking about? What's wrong?"

"To the p-park. Tonight. I d-don't wanna *go.*"

Oh. Fuck. The remembrance service. Raph had known there was no way he could avoid the subject today; he just hadn't anticipated it coming up so early. He *definitely* hadn't expected Mikey not wanting to go at all.

"Mikey…I—"

"I know you think this is all s-stupid," Mikey said, now full-on sobbing. "I know, I know, *I know*. But I don't wanna go because it's *stupid,* I don't wanna go because it's just…too much. It's *too much!* I can't *do* it again!"

Raph engulfed his little brother in a bone-crushing hug. Mikey's arms wrapped around him, fingers clutching the grooves of Raph's shell.

"I'm sorry Mikey," he said sincerely. "And I don't think it's stupid."

"Yes you *do*," Mikey said angrily, pushing against Raph but not hard enough to break out of the hug.

"I'm not gonna sit here and pretend like I don't…see this differently than you guys," Raph said as diplomatically as possible. "But I don't think it's stupid, Mikey. Not anymore. *I* was stupid for ever thinking that."

Mikey pulled back slowly to look at Raph searchingly.

"For you he's…gone. And that hurts you. I'm sorry I didn't really get that before, and I made you feel bad for being upset. That was really, really fucked up, and I'm *so* sorry Mikey. You're…you're allowed to be mad at me, and you're *allowed* to be sad about Leo. I'm not gonna make you feel shitty or stupid for it anymore, I fucking promise."

Mikey slammed back into Raph and cried even harder. Raph ran his hand up and down Mikey's shell. Jesus, he'd gone so long without really hugging his brothers, and now he'd been a shoulder for both of them to cry on in less than 24 hours. They'd been so tactile as kids, and not just in training; roughhousing over toys, clinging onto each other in excitement, Mikey always hanging off Raph's big shell…God, he hadn't realized how much he missed it. He just wished it hadn't taken his brothers breaking down on him to recognize it.

“Will you come?” Mikey asked wetly into Raph’s chest. Raph stiffened in his brother’s arms.

“Mikey...it's not like you're going alone. Donnie'll be there."

“That's *different*,” Mikey sobbed.

"How?"

“*I don’t know*,” Mikey said desperately. “I don’t know! And I don’t know why I’m freaking out about this so much! He’s…he’s g-gone, he’s *been* gone, and I shouldn’t be so s-scared of…of listening to everyone talk about it. But I am! I'm *scared*, Raph! I don’t know how I’m gonna *do* this again. But maybe if…maybe if you come…”

“...then maybe it won't be so scary?” Raph pieced together, Mikey nodding weakly against his plastron. Raph finally understood. Mikey wanted someone to guide him through something difficult, something he was afraid of. He wanted a leader, a *big brother*. Mikey didn't see Donnie as a big brother, only Leo and Raph. The better option obviously would have been Leo, but therein lied the problem. Raph was Mikey’s only choice.

“*Please,* Raph,” Mikey begged, squeezing tighter.

“I uh…I don’t know if I’m allowed, Mikey,” Raph said delicately.

At this, Mikey finally broke away. Despite his red, puffy eyes, he looked angry. Determined.

“I’ll *make* him let you come.”

“Dude—” Raph started, but Mikey cut him off.

“No, I don’t care what dad says. I’ll go talk to him and tell him you’re coming.”

Raph swallowed. He didn't want to go, but he didn't want to let Mikey down. Not now that he'd promised himself to be there for his brothers, and *especially* not now that Mikey was begging him. He'd literally *just* said Mikey could ask him for anything he needed, and apparently this was what Mikey needed. Raph wasn't a liar. He wouldn't go back on his word.

But Raph also *very much* didn't want Mikey to fight his battles for him. Raph couldn't think of anything more cowardly than having Mikey go to their father to ask permission on his behalf.

"I'll…I'll ask him, Mikey," Raph said, swallowing his own fear as best he could.

"I can do it," Mikey said quickly, now looking nervous.

"No," Raph shook his head. "I'll ask him. I'll tell him you want me to go. If it's what *you* want and not what *I* want…that should be good enough for him. He'll probably say yes if he knows it's not really me asking. Actually, he'll probably say yes *because* I don't want to go."

"Raph…dad isn't out to *get you*. He doesn't *hate* you."

"Yeah, don't be so sure," Raph grumbled.

"I'm serious, Raph!"

"Yeah, well, maybe he doesn't hate me, but he sure as shit doesn't *like* me," Raph growled, despite himself. He'd let himself have just this little bit anger. Mikey looked like he wanted to argue more, but Raph cut him off. "It's fine, Mikey. I can do it."

"Just don't…" Mikey began, looking nervous and trailing off.

"I won't," knowing what Mikey meant. *Don't blow up on him, don't do what you did last year.*

"C'mere," Raph smiled, throwing an arm around Mikey again and reeling him back in for another hug. Right now, Raph's brother still had tears rolling down his cheeks. "I forgot how good a hugger you are."

“That’s true, I *a-am* the best,” Mikey said, hiccuping a little through a smile.

“Yeah you are, *little* bro,” Raph smirked and Mikey laughed a little. “You want to go hang out in my room for a bit? We can play Mario Kart or something. I don’t think the others will be up for a while.”

“Yeah…thanks, Raph,” Mikey said with a squeeze. Raph let go and stood up, grabbing both his and Mikey’s cereal bowls to carry them to his room. The best Raph could do for his brother right now was help take his mind off things for a bit.

Raph couldn't lie to himself, though. This was partly selfish. He knew hanging with Mikey for a while would take his mind off things, too. They played for an hour or two before Raph could no longer ignore the clock. Splinter would be up by now. If Raph tried to delay the inevitable any longer, he might lose his nerve. He owed it to Mikey to not chicken out, though. He could do this. He *had* to do this.

As Raph left his room to walk down the hall, he was struck by just how lucky Mikey was. Mikey still had a big brother to hold his hand or hide behind. Mikey wouldn't have to face what he feared alone, and Raph couldn't help the little pang of jealousy he felt. *His* big brother wasn't here. *His* big brother couldn't help him. *He* couldn't hide behind his big brother, couldn't ask him to go in there with him, couldn't beg him to knock on the door for him because he was *so fucking scared* that he couldn't even make his arms work.

Raph stood alone before his father's bedroom door. Leo wasn't here. *Nobody* was here. Nobody would hear how fucking pathetic he was, whispering under his breath and begging his big brother just like Mike had begged *him* only hours ago. He couldn't do this. Not alone, *not alone*, but he *was*. He was *alone,* and he *couldn't do this!*

"*Please...*" Raph breathed. "*Please, Leo*."

His hand rose and knocked.

Chapter 5: Nobody Wants to Hear It

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph felt his chest start to tighten and his heartbeat speeding up. *Fuck fuck fuck*. He'd heard the knock but hadn't registered actually *doing* it. And now he could hear movement on the other side of the door. Dad was coming. *Fuck fuck fuuuuuu-*

"Raphael?"

Raph was now face to face with his father. Or rather, face to chest. It had been years since Raph had started needing to look *down* instead of *up* at his father, but Splinter's gaze made Raph feel small in a way that nothing else ever could.

"Can I…?" Raph swallowed, unable to finish the sentence. How the fuck was he going to do this when he couldn't even ask to come in?

Splinter's expression was unreadable, but he stepped aside to let Raph into his room. He closed the door behind them, and Raph tried to not fully panic. *Be here now, be here now, be here-*

'Here' was the last fucking place he wanted to be.

"What is it?" Splinter asked. He sounded hesitant. After what Raph had said to him exactly a year ago today, Raph didn't blame him.

"Mike…uh, Mikey's really upset."

Instantly, his father's expression darkened.

"What did you say to him?" Splinter said with narrow eyes and an accusatory tone.

"Nothing!" Raph protested. "Nothing, I swear. He just…I asked if he was okay and uh, he said he was…nervous."

"Nervous?" Splinter asked, sounding worried. "About what?"

"About uh…*tonight.*" He couldn't look at his father. Raph felt pathetic. He tried to focus on the quilt Scumbug had made for Splinter folded neatly on the bed. It was green, with splashes of blue, red, purple, and orange.

Raph risked a glance at Splinter out of the corner of his eye, and saw his dad's eyebrows had shot up. He looked concerned. *For Mikey, not me*, Raph quickly reminded himself. Raph was concerned for Mikey, too. That's why he was here. He had to do this for Mikey. The thought spurred him on.

"He wants me to come tonight. He said that would make him feel better about going."

Splinter was silent for a few long, painful moments.

“Will you behave?”

“Yes.”

“You swear to me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m serious. I don’t want to hear a single lie out of you tonight. Nobody wants to hear it.”

And there it was.

Fuck. Don’t talk back. Don’t lose it. Swallow your fucking pride. Just fucking ***do it****.*

“I won’t…I won’t say a *word*.”

The silence stretched on as Raph waited for Splinter to pass his judgement. Raph hated the part of himself that wanted his dad to say no. The price of a *yes* was so high, but he’d already agreed to pay it. He’d keep his mouth shut all night. For Mikey. For Mikey and Donnie. Just for tonight, Raph would give in.

“It’s going to be cold. Wear your nice coat.”

Raph didn’t respond. He didn’t nod, didn’t even look at his dad as he headed for the door. He got what he came for, now he could leave. He just had to make it to his room. He could do it. He could make it to his room and fall apart there. He just needed to get there. Get to his room. Where was it? Where the fuck was his room? Where was his room?

“Raph?” A voice to his right. He turned his head toward it. Donnie. What was Donnie doing here? Where were they? They weren’t in Raph’s room. He was looking for it. He needed to get there.

“Whoa dude, you don’t look so…oh, *oh shit*. Are you having…? *Shit shit shit*.”

Donnie was closer now. Why was he so close? Nobody liked being close to Raph. Not anymore. Not when they thought he was a liar. *Nobody wants to hear it.*

“Raph, bro, I don’t…I don’t know how to *help* you!” Donnie said quickly, voice low and strained.

Help? Donnie wanted to help him? Raph didn’t need help. He just needed to get to his room. That was all. Just get to his room. He’d be okay in his room. Just had to find it.

“Is, uh, is this okay?”

Donnie was touching him. His brother’s hand was on Raph’s wrist. Of course it was okay. Donnie could do whatever he wanted. Raph wasn’t going to stop him. He couldn’t stop anyone. Couldn’t stop them from giving up on Leo. Couldn’t stop them from calling him a liar. So of course he couldn’t stop Donnie from pulling him down the hall.

Oh, his room. They made it. Good. This was better. Right? Right? Why wasn’t this better? It should be better here. It wasn’t. What should he do now?

Mikey was still in here. Raph had forgotten. How could he have forgotten? Mikey was so *important*. More important than him. Raph wondered if there was more orange on his dad’s quilt than red. There should be. More purple and blue, too. He bet if he unfolded it, there’d hardly be any red on it at all.

“Donnie? What’s going on? What’s wrong with Raph?”

“I think he’s having a panic attack,” Donnie said urgently.

“What?” Mikey sounded panicked himself. “But he’s not like, breathing weird or anything!”

“They don’t always look like that. I was googling this shit last night after he told me. I think he’s just…checked out.”

“What do we *do*?”

“I don’t know,” Donnie groaned. “Raph? Raph, dude, can you sit down?”

Sure. He’d do whatever. He realized he was near the edge of his bed. Donnie was still holding his wrist. He sat down and the bed sagged underneath him. He wished he could sink all the way into it. Disappear. Disappearing sounded pretty good right now. Maybe he’d disappear to wherever Leo had.

Donnie and Mikey were still talking. Maybe to him, maybe just about him. Either way, it didn’t really matter. Raph was in his room. This had been the goal. Mission accomplished. He could just stop now. Everything

could just

stop.

And everything did stop. For a while, at least. It *must* have been a while, because now that Raph’s eyes seemed to be able to focus again, he could see that there was a sandwich on his desk. It was lunch already? The sandwich wasn’t the only thing at his desk. Donnie was sitting in Raph’s computer chair.

“What are you doing?” Raph asked.

“*Jesus*,” Donnie yelped, the chair rolling back a few inches as he startled.

“You okay?”

“Am *I* okay?” Donnie said, incredulous. “You’ve been staring at the wall for like *ever*, dude!”

Raph was starting to wish he still was. The realization of what had just happened was crashing down on him fast. This was fucking *mortifying*. It was one thing to tell Donnie about this, but having him actually *see* it? Raph wanted to melt into the floor.

“Where’s Mikey?” Raph deflected.

“He’s beating himself up in his room. He feels like a piece of shit for asking you to come. Why didn’t you just let him talk to dad for you, man?”

“I’m not a coward. Dad doesn’t scare me.”

“He clearly fucking does!”

“Just forget about it, Donnie. It’s fine.”

“Again, like I said last night, it’s *not* fine,” Donnie pushed back. Raph didn’t have the energy to argue. That sandwich was looking pretty good right about now. Donnie must have seen him eying it, because he grabbed the plate and rolled the chair close enough to hand it to Raph. He mumbled a thanks before taking a bite.

Donnie busied himself with looking at his phone while Raph ate on his bed. He was still coming down, the tension in his body still making his movements embarrassingly jerky. He tried not to think about Donnie stealing glances at him as he finished his food and got up to head for the door.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“To take a shower,” Raph grunted.

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m tense as fuck and it helps me relax after this kinda shit,” Raph said quickly. “Plus…he said I could come, so I guess I should clean up.”

“Whoa, dude, what? There’s no *way* you’re still up for tonight. Not after *that*.”

“Donnie,” Raph sighed. “This isn’t anything new. When this shit happens, I just gotta get up and move on.”

“This is so messed up,” Donnie said, more to himself than Raph.

“Go tell Mikey to cut it out, okay?”

Raph left Donnie in his room as he headed for the bathroom. He spent absolutely way too long in the shower, but heat soothed his stiff muscles. Jesus, he’d really locked up there. He didn’t want to admit it, but that one had been *really* fucking bad. It had been *long*. They weren’t normally that long. Why had this one been so different?

He added it to the list of things to talk to Dr. Hart about and tried to focus on the task ahead. Toweling off and heading back to his room, he found Mikey had returned. He hadn’t seen his brothers in his room this much in ages. It was nice.

“Raph, I am *so* sorry, I shouldn’t—”

“Mikey, stop,” Raph cut him off firmly. “I was gonna have to talk to him about it either way. I should’ve done it days ago. It’s my own fault for putting it off.”

“He shouldn’t have made you come to him about it! We’ve known they were gonna do this again for months now!”

“Dude, dad never initiates stuff with me. He wants *me* to come crawling back to *him* and apologize first.”

"*Did* you?"

Raph should have anticipated Donnie's question, but somehow it still blindsided him. He tensed up, knowing Donnie already knew the answer. Why was he going to force him to say it?

"Wait, wait, wait," Mikey interjected. "Guys, let's…let's not start stuff. Today has already sucked, and it's gonna suck even more later. Can we just…chill for the next few hours?"

"Yeah, okay," Donnie relented. "Sorry, Raph. I'll let it go."

'For now' was left unsaid. Just as Raph was unable to give up on Leo, Donnie seemed unable to give up on his crusade to make Raph apologize to Splinter.

Raph *did* feel sorry for how he'd hassled his father for months about Leo, and how it all came to a head in a verbal equivalent of a WWE Smackdown. Raph had been so frustrated and so confused why nobody understood or believed him, that he'd been unable to explain himself reasonably and rationally. He'd gone about it all wrong, and now it seemed he'd never be able to convince anyone.

Raph *did* want to apologize. Raph wanted to say he was sorry for some of the things he'd said and *how* he'd said it, but Raph would *never* apologize for saying Leo was still alive. Splinter had made it *pretty fucking clear* that he would never forgive Raph until he "accepted" that Leo was gone, though. Maybe they weren't biologically related, but Raph had every ounce of Splinter's stubbornness and then some. With neither being able to alter their own terms of reconciliation, father and son would remain at a stalemate.

"We're supposed to head out around 8. It starts at 9, but last year it took a while to get all the speakers organized," Donnie explained.

"Okay," Raph acknowledged.

"Can, uh…" Mikey said nervously. "Can we keep hanging out?"

"Yeah," Raph said instantly. "For sure, Mike."

“We’re not bothering you?”

Raph wanted to make some sort of joke. ‘*Of course you are, that’s your whole job as little brothers’* or something. But with how upset Mikey already was and how hard Donnie was trying to look like he wasn’t, Raph decided against it.

“Go grab your extra joycons so you can destroy me ‘n Mike, Donnie,” Raph said, rearranging his pillows to make room for his brothers on his bed. Donnie chuckled, and Raph watched as he left his room looking a little lighter on his feet than before.

They played most of the day, only stopping long enough to eat some of the food Scumbug had made for dinner before returning to Raph’s room. To Raph, every single second of this had been worth the especially shitty attack earlier. He wasn’t stupid; he knew his brothers weren’t here just for their own sake. They kept taking very unstealthy peeks at him (Leo would be so disappointed in how un-ninja-like they were being). Raph felt a little self-conscious, but mostly he just felt happy that they seem to genuinely give a shit about him again. Maybe he should have fallen apart in front of them sooner.

It wasn’t until they had less than half an hour before their scheduled departure that Donnie and Mikey left. Raph was surprised at how lonely it made him feel. He’d spent most of the past two years alone, after all. He should be used to it.

It would be momentary, though, because tonight he was going *with* them. The thought both thrilled and terrified him.

Raph dressed in the only formal outfit he had. He’d outgrown the handful of nice clothes he used to wear, back when he and his brothers were still so new and interesting that they’d wound up on just about every talk show from New York for Los Angeles. Now, though, he only had some black slacks and white button down that fit after his growth spurt.

He didn’t have a sports coat to go with it. It didn’t matter though. His dad was right, it would be fairly cold tonight. He had a nicer winter coat that Mondo of all people had given him. Skateboarding, it turned out, was no longer his only hobby. Now with access to all the art and culture New York City had to offer, Mondo had found himself deep in the world of high-end streetwear. Raph guessed it made sense for the skateboarding subculture to lead his cousin there, but sometimes it still felt a little at odds with the baggy shirt, glowstick wearing goofball he’d met so many years ago.

Raph couldn’t complain, though. The jacket fit like a glove, and he begrudgingly had to acknowledge that it made him look good. He also felt comfortable in it, which was surprising since he’d never

really felt great in any sort of formal clothes. Leo had given him *such* a hard time for wearing a t-shirt with a tuxedo printed on the front to their first prom.

But Mondo just had a knack for this stuff, and had given Raph something that didn't make him feel like a fish out of water. It didn't clash with his personal sense of style, but was also nice enough to not raise any eyebrows for him not being dressed up enough. Mondo always just explained this skill as picking up on people's 'vibes'. Thinking of Mondo made him wonder, for the first time that night, if the other mutants would be going.

He'd find out soon enough, though. It was time to meet in the living room. He took advantage of his last few moments alone to close his eyes and take a few long, steady breaths. Raph had already warned his brothers that he'd told Splinter he wouldn't say a word tonight, and that he was going to be *very* literal about it. Unless someone addressed him in a way that necessitated a verbal response, Raph was going to be *dead fucking silent*.

Raph started to head for the living room, but something gave him pause. He doubled back, passing his own room and heading for Mikey's. He rounded the corner to find the door was still closed. He knocked. There was no answer. He turned the knob anyway, opening the door. Raph was unsurprised to find his brother still inside.

Mikey was dressed and sitting on the foot of his bed. He was wringing his hands in his lap, and Raph could see the tears in his eyes threatening to spill over any second now. He made his way into the room to stand right in front of his little brother. Raph reached one hand behind Mikey's head and pulled him forward until it rested on his stomach. Mikey hiccupped into Raph's coat, pressing his forehead firmly against his brother. Raph rubbed Mikey's head gently through the black wool beanie he'd already put on.

With his other hand, Raph reached down to take one of Mikey's. Stepping back, he used the grip to haul Mikey to his feet. Raph gave him a couple pats on his back before leading his brother out of the room. He only let go once they had made it to the living room, where everyone else was already waiting.

The other mutants *were* coming. Everyone from Mondo to Rocksteady was there, all dressed in black, all subdued and quiet. It made Raph sick to his stomach how much this felt like a funeral. He wanted so badly to remind everyone it wasn't, but Raph remained silent. Unlike the rest of them, for Raph this night wasn't about Leo. It was about Donnie and Mikey. It was about being there for *them*.

Splinter looked around the room at his extended family, his eyes only briefly catching Raph's. He heaved a heavy sigh, straightened his back, squared his shoulders and addressed the room.

“Right. Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slow burn. I swear, we're getting to the juicy Telepathic Bond/Mind Meld/Mutant Powers tags VERY soon.

I don't think Splinter is a bad dad, just not the best dad right now. He does have his reasons for distancing himself from Raph, though. I also think the movie shows that this iteration of Splinter can be very untrusting of his sons and quick to jump to conclusions.

Someday we'll get to hear exactly what Raph said to burn this bridge so spectacularly...

Chapter 6: Hey, Leo

Chapter Notes

> Sorry, this one is going to be pretty narration heavy while Raph sticks to his vow of silence for the night. You will be rewarded with a special guest appearance at the end, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



They made their way to the exit of the Lair in a long procession. Once they were topside, Raph was surprised to see a line of black Suburbans waiting for them until he remembered that this event had been organized by the city. He couldn't stop the smile that crept across his face as he watched Rocksteady and Bebop awkwardly squeeze into one. Raph heard Mikey let out a few little giggles beside him.

Raph was hit with an instant dose of karma, however, as he soon found himself trying to delicately maneuver his considerable height and enormous shell into a car. Whether it was intentional or just a result of the disorganization of a large group of oddly sized mutants trying to fit into cars made for humans, Raph and his brothers wound up riding in an entirely separate car from their father and Scumbug.

Donnie used the opportunity to fill Raph in on how this was supposed to play out. Apparently, Donnie had been coordinating on behalf of the family with the event organizers. Raph had had no idea Donnie had taken this task upon himself, but knowing how bad Splinter was with email, he concluded it made sense. He felt a creeping sense of guilt knowing Donnie had been dealing with thinking about the event for months when Raph had only been agonizing about it for the past couple of weeks.

"It's gonna start with a speech from the mayor," Donnie explained. "Politicians aren't exactly known for being brief, and you *know* how much she freaking loves us, so it's gonna be long. Then it's the NYPD Commissioner's turn, then a priest is gonna lead a like, nondenominational prayer for whatever religious people are there. Then there's one more speaker after that, then dad. He had the chance to do a whole speech, too, but he didn't really want to, so he's just going to thank everyone for coming. Then some musicians from the Philharmonic come on to play while people lay flowers and stuff at the grave and leave. Once everyone's done, we can leave, too."

Jesus, this sounded like it was going to be fucking marathon. No wonder Mikey was so worked up. Raph felt a little better knowing what the game plan was, though. It sounded like he wouldn't have to really do anything but physically be there.

"Are we gonna be on stage again?" Mikey asked in a small voice.

"Yeah," Donnie said apologetically. "I tried to like…make sure we were seated more off to the side this time, though. The mayor kept pushing back, so I had to give her *something*. You know how she is…She loves us being her little *mascots*. She'd probably have us follow her around for every photo op if she could."

Raph snorted.

"But, y'know, I guess we kinda owe her, so…" Donnie trailed off.

It was true. Mayor Rose Buckley, overbearing as she could be, had been the mutant's greatest champion since day one. Raph knew much of it was genuine, and that she had earnestly appreciated that they'd been able to stop Superfly before it had become a mass casualty event. She'd personally come to meet them that very same night while they were being patched up in the hospital, emphatically vowing to repay them for their service to the city.

But it had become apparent very quickly when her adopted role as defender of New York's underdog heroes became politically valuable to her. Despite what they had done, there were still people out

there in the rest of the country, even the federal government, who thought the mutants should be held in captivity for experimentation. They were a small but vocal minority.

Then Mayor Buckley had issued a protective order on them and very publicly dared anyone to "come see what happens when you mess with New York's own". Her rallying cry evoked a sense of unity the city hadn't felt since the last terrible attack, and soon all of New York was up in arms to defend the turtles and other mutants. The sentiment soon spread nationwide, a unifying cause in a country that had seen very little to agree on for many years.

The mayor's take-no-shit attitude had made her popularity soar. The rumors of a presidential bid followed not long after. It was no surprise she'd want to remind people how close she was with the turtles.

Raph understood that if not for Mayor Buckley, their freedom and new way of life would most likely not be possible. He would never stop being thankful that she was the reason they could go to school, walk around on the surface, and be part of the world. If the mayor showing them off once in a while was the cost of their freedom, then so be it.

It wasn't lost on Raph, though, that the mayor's words had almost certainly sealed Leo's fate. Her bluff had been called, and Leo had paid the price. Mayor Buckley talked a big game, but when the moment came, she hadn't been able to back it up. Nobody had. Not even Raph.

The car rounded the corner of the stately New York Public Library and pulled up to Bryant Park. Once stopped, Raph and his brother poured out onto the sidewalk. A small collection of event organizers were there to greet them.

Whenever an event requiring a stage was held in the park, a temporary one would be set up just on the edge of the grassy lawn. The organizers led the mutants to it, pointing to a walled off area behind it where they could wait. It allowed them privacy before things would begin.

Donnie and Splinter didn't go in, instead walking toward the staircase leading to the stage with the organizers. They were going to go over the schedule and logistics one last time. Raph had shot Donnie a questioning look that he hoped Donnie understood to mean '*do you want me to come with you?*' His brother must have gotten the message, mumbling "I'm good, stick with Mikey" before heading off with Splinter.

Raph realized that this was also probably one of Donnie's coping mechanisms. Donnie liked to know how things worked. Raph knew it was comforting for his little brother, and gave him a sense of

control. Raph understood the feeling of wanting some control all too well.

The privacy didn't last long. Soon, others who were more heavily involved in the night's proceedings filtered in, including the speakers. Most of them simply greeted the mutants at large, but not Mayor Buckley.

She'd arrived in the company of Splinter and Donnie, apparently finished with their final walkthrough. The mayor took time to greet and shake the hand of not just the other speakers, but each and every one of the mutants as well.

"Raphael," Mayor Buckley said softly as Raph shook her hand. It was a testament to her political prowess that Raph had a hard time telling if it was authentic, or just her well-practiced ability to schmooze.

"It's been too long. I'm so glad you're joining us tonight. I know this has all been especially difficult for you," the Mayor said sympathetically, patting his hand that she still held in a shake before letting go and moving on to Mikey.

"Dad told everyone last year you were too upset to come," Donnie whispered to Raph as the Mayor took more time to speak with Mikey.

It took everything Raph had to school his face and not outright snarl. His dad had the gall to call Raph a liar when *he'd* lied to all these people? *'Too upset'* his ass. If he had been upset, it wasn't over Leo. It was over everyone's lack of action.

And here they were again, wasting precious time and energy when they should be continuing the search for Leo. They'd all given up so fucking quickly. It made Raph sick. If he could, he'd be out there right now. He would've quit school, given up *everything* if it meant he could just keep looking.

But Raph didn't need to go down that angry rabbit hole again. He needed to think of Mikey and Donnie right now, *not* the tracking chip embedded deep in his shell. Everyone had said it was to keep him safe, that it was for his own good, that it was to protect him from himself. Raph knew what it really was, though; it was a fucking *leash*.

Suddenly, Raph could hear a flurry of instruments warming up.

“They’re gonna play while the crowd fills in the park…we have about 15 minutes until we gotta go up there,” Donnie mumbled, checking the time on his phone.

It didn’t sound like a full orchestra, probably just a small group from New York’s Philharmonic. At first, the music grated on him. It was too soft and too sad, making this feel even more like the funeral it wasn’t. But looking at the way Mikey had ever so slightly relaxed as the gentle music filled the park, Raph decided maybe it wasn’t so bad after all.

Too soon, it was time. Someone in a headset was gesturing for the speakers and mutants to head to the stage. Whatever tension the music had eased was suddenly back, and in any other circumstance Raph would have laughed that Mikey could get any more green than he already was. But as it was, Raph was feeling a little queasy himself. Like his brothers, Raph had a beanie to ward off the cold November air. He took a big breath through his nose and straightened his hat as he made to leave.

Raph slung an arm over Mikey’s shoulders and tucked him in close. The feeling of Mikey leaning into him was nice. A few milliseconds later, he felt Donnie’s fingers clutching at the fabric of his jacket on his back. Clumped together like this, they came around from the back of the stage, up the stairs, and into the spotlight.

As they ascended the stairs, Raph felt himself rising to something else entirely. Raph felt useful. He felt proud. He felt *made* for this. Nothing else mattered. The crowd was irrelevant. His dad may as well have not even been there. This morning, the last thing he wanted to do was come to this event. Now with his brothers clinging to him for support, there was nowhere else on Earth he’d rather be. There wasn’t anything in the *world* that could distract him from this new and intense feeling of purpose. Raph’s whole existence had suddenly been condensed down into this one simple but overwhelming directive:

Protect.

Is this how Leo had felt? Had it been this easy for him, too? Had his feet carried him to his fate just as effortlessly as Raph now made his way toward his own?

Raph always hoped that if their roles had been switched, he would have given himself up just as quickly as Leo had. It wasn’t until this moment, though, that he knew for sure that he would have. He’d do anything, absolutely *anything* to protect his brothers.

Right now, that ‘anything’ wasn’t handing himself over to a madman, but facing a crowd mourning a brother Raph hadn’t yet truly lost. It was a crowd that did not know what Raph did, and most likely never would. In a park of hundreds, in a city of millions, Raph was the sole harbinger of this truth. His brothers and his family might be right there beside him, but in this way, Raph was still entirely alone.

They were led to their seats, and Raph was relieved to find that Donnie had indeed successfully gotten them seated off to the side. He saw the mayor make one last feeble attempt to have them come closer to the podium, and Raph felt a little jolt of pride at how deftly Donnie ignored her. Instead, Splinter and Scumbug took the innermost seats, the collection of speakers separating them from the turtles. The other mutants took the second row behind them.

The music died, and the small contingent from the Philharmonic now sat silently in their seats on the opposite side of the stage. The mayor took that as her queue to step up to the podium.

Almost immediately, Raph tuned her out. As he had expected, it was nothing but worn out platitudes and overused, flowery language. A keyword would make it past Raph’s mental barrier every once in a while, the static in his brain occasionally interrupted by “heroic” and “selfless” and “fearless”.

That one really got him. This lady didn’t know anything. She didn’t know how scared Leo had been, but Raph did. He’d seen the terror in his brother’s eyes, saw his nostrils flare from his too-quick breaths, watched his jaw clench with just how scared he was. His choice had been easy and quickly made, sure; but it had been anything but *fearless*.

If Raph wanted to make it through the night without blowing a gasket, he needed to seriously tune out. Not in the way he had this morning, though. He started trying to count how many people in the crowd were wearing stupid blue bandanas like Leo’s. When that got boring, he switched to counting the number of real candles vs fake LED ones. This one was too easy, since most of the little tea candles people had brought burned out by the time the final speaker was up.

When they had been waiting backstage, Raph had been surprised to see that not only was this final speaker someone he knew, it was one of his classmates. *This one* Raph might actually pay attention to. A tall, dark haired kid with a crisp blue suit on pulled out a stack of notes, adjusted the mic, and began speaking.

“My name is Ryan Bellinger, and I’m a senior at Eastman High. I met Leonardo in my sophomore year. First, I want to thank Leonardo’s father for allowing me to speak tonight. We are all here because of his son’s bravery. I’m sure there are some people in this crowd who would not be here

tonight—and I don't just mean in this park—if not for Leonardo. For so many of us, he was the very definition of a hero."

Ugh, maybe this one wasn't worth listening to, either. This sounded like more of the same garbage from the last few people. Raph was just about to start counting how many people were nursing some late-night coffee when Ryan's next line caught his attention.

"But if Leo was the definition of a hero, *I* was the very definition of an asshole."

There were surprised laughs from the crowd. The unexpected crudeness seemed to have woken everyone up. Even Mikey sniffled out a little chuckle. Okay, maybe Ryan did have something interesting up his sleeve. Raph abandoned his latest counting game to listen.

"I was every single stereotype a high school football player could be. I thought I was a reeeeal tough guy, y'know? Sometimes I still don't understand how Leo knew that I wasn't before I even did.

"But that was the thing about Leo. He just *got* people. He could just see people for who they really were. And who *I* really was, was just a kid scared outta his *mind.*

"My mom was diagnosed with cancer right before school started that year. I didn't tell anyone, not my coach, not my teammates, not one single person. I was scared for my mom, and I was scared of how people would treat me if they knew *just* how scared I was."

"And I hid that fear by being cruel. I was only a sophomore, but I messed with every little freshman that got in my way. I even took a few dunks on Leo. I didn't care what he and his brothers had done for the city. Actually, I think that made him a *better* target for me. If I could mess with some bigshot hero, then maybe nobody would mess with *me*."

"But I was *already* a mess. I was *so* messed up that I honestly can't even remember the first few months of that school year. What I *do* remember, though, is Leo walking up to me one day totally out of the blue."

Raph remembered this vividly.

“I wonder what’s up with Ryan,” Leo had said, more to himself than Raph.

“What?” Raph asked. He looked down the row of lockers at Ryan, who looked completely normal to Raph.

“I’m gonna go ask him if he’s alright.”

Raph had wanted to remind Leo that in literally every movie they’d seen about high school, it never ended well when a nerd approached a jock. Because despite whatever coolness points Leo had scored by defeating Superfly, his dumb brother was still a fucking nerd at heart. This Ryan douchebag had already fucked with Leo a couple times already. Why was his brother asking for trouble?

But Leo had marched over to Ryan before Raph could stop him. Raph could only watch nervously as Leo started talking. Moments later, Ryan’s face had crumpled, and suddenly Leo was *hugging* him.

“Leo asked me if I was okay. Leo asked *me*, a guy he barely knew, a guy who’d been a jerk to him and to anyone who wasn’t on the football team, a guy who he shouldn’t have even *cared* about, if I was *okay*.”

“I’m not embarrassed to admit I started crying. Because I *wasn’t* okay. I was so scared and so alone, and Leo threw me a lifeline I didn’t even know I needed. When I told him what was wrong, Leo gave me a hug, and I have never needed a hug as badly as I did right then.”

“Leo told me that I should let my friends know. He said that they would want to know, that they would want to help me when I was hurting. And he was *right*. When I finally told everyone what was happening, my whole life changed. I had support from my friends, my teammates, my coach, and my teachers. Things were still hard and I was still scared, but I wasn’t *alone*.”

“And it wasn’t just me! Leo was always reaching out, always checking in on people, always helping people. He had such a reputation for it that the team and I gave him this;”

The projector that had been displaying a slideshow of photos of Leo switched to a new image, eliciting a chorus of laughter from the crowd. Leo was in the middle of a group of laughing and smiling members of the football team, sporting a vest with the words “EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TURTLE” stitched into the fabric. A younger Ryan had his arm thrown over Leo’s shoulder, whose expression was something between embarrassment and happiness.

Raph remembered when a couple of the guys from the team had asked him in private if it would be an okay thing to do. They'd awkwardly explained that they wanted a fun way to show Leo how much people appreciated how he helped Ryan and so many other students at Eastman, but they were worried it might be offensive. It had taken Raph a moment to understand why, but he realized that technically he and his brothers were animals, and the guys thought it might be demeaning.

But Raph had thought it was hilarious and told them to go for it. It didn't offend him so it probably wouldn't offend Leo. It would draw attention to him, though, and Leo hated attention. It was all the more reason for Raph to give them the greenlight.

"The idea might have started out as a bit of a joke, but I actually got pretty choked up giving it to him. Because Leonardo taught me that being a hero isn't always saving lives. Sometimes it's just about changing them. And he didn't do that through big flashy gestures. He did that through kindness and thoughtfulness. He was *there* for people. He was there for *me*."

"In the end, my mother did pass. Leo came to the funeral, along with the team and many of my classmates. I know what it feels like to lose someone. It's like losing part of your *soul*. But I also know what it means to have so many people there for you."

Ryan turned toward the mutants. He looked at Raph and his brothers, nodding before turning his attention toward Splinter.

"I know there's nothing anyone can do to change what happened. But everyone here tonight, everyone who couldn't be but wanted to, everyone in this entire city is here for you and your family. Today is Thanksgiving, and I will always be thankful that Leonardo was part of my life, even if it was just for a short while. All of us will always be thankful for Leonardo, and for you, who raised him to be the hero he was. Thank you, Mr. Splinter."

Ryan collected his notes and left the podium. He stopped to give Splinter a hug as the crowd clapped. The applause continued as Splinter approached the podium, stepping onto a stool someone had placed under it so he could reach the microphone.

"And I must thank *you* all for coming tonight. I am afraid I am not as well-spoken as the mayor or our young Ryan is, so I will just leave you with this; my son wanted more than anything to live in the human world. I never understood this human holiday before, but I do now. It was short, too short, but thank you for welcoming my son into your world, and thank you for being here tonight. Thank you."

Splinter stepped down to another round of applause, and the music started up once again. Raph and his brothers stood to follow Splinter and Scumbug off the stage. There wouldn't be enough room for all the mutants where they were going, so the organizers had suggested just immediate family be present. Raph wrapped his arm tighter around Mikey, feeling him start to shake as they approached.

The monument to Leo was off to the north side of the park. It had been placed in a green space between two opposing rows of trees that lined the park's sidewalks. It wasn't the only monument in the park, but it was one of the few that included a statue. Most were subtle plaques tucked away in nooks of the park. There was nothing subtle about Leo's monument, though.

It was a life size bronze statue of a Leo on top of a limestone pedestal. At least, it was *supposed* to be Leo, but it looked completely wrong to Raph. It captured none of Leo's awkwardness, none of his nervousness, none of his dumb, goofy expressions, none of his softness and care for his brothers, none of what had made Leo a real-life actual person. Instead, his face was forever frozen in a confident and resolute stare. Raph supposed he should be happy that's how the city saw Leo, but it frustrated him nonetheless.

Raph *hated* that his family called this a grave. There was no body buried here. There'd been no body to recover. The popular belief was that those who took him hadn't wanted the body to be found, but Raph understood that was because *Leo was still using it*. Nevertheless, in the absence of a true grave, Splinter had started referring to the monument as such. The rest of the family—barring Raph of course—had followed suit.

There were no chairs here, but a small section of green space beside the monument had been roped off for Raph and his family to stand. He could not believe they were expected to just stand here awkwardly and watch as hundreds of people waited their turn to pass the monument and place beneath it whatever offerings they had brought.

They were only a few minutes in before Mikey was openly sobbing. They'd felt more removed, more insulated from the humans below while up on the stage. But now they were just feet from every single person who came forward. They could see every person's sad face, watch every tear that was shed, hear every whispered expression of gratitude meant for Leo.

Raph felt his own tears building along with a growing sense of confusion. He wasn't *mourning*. He knew Leo was still alive, so why was starting to fucking cry? Why did he feel so fucking shitty?

This was…wasn't grief. It was *regret*. It was *guilt*. It was *shame*. It was consuming him. How could all of these people be here crying over what he'd done? He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve their

sympathy or their thanks. He wasn't a hero. He was the furthest thing from a hero there could be. He was just some **dumb, worthless *animal*, alone in a *cage*—**

...what?

Raph blinked through the tears that had begun streaming down his face. His heart was hammering in his chest. What…what the fuck was *that?* The flurry of manic thoughts had gone just as fast as they came, and Raph had already forgotten all but the last of them. An animal in a cage? What had he been thinking? Yes, he *was* alone in so many ways. And he had felt…trapped by it, but he'd never thought of this loneliness as a *cage*. It could be crushing at times, but he'd never felt so utterly confined by it.

And sure, he had started life as a normal everyday turtle, but he couldn't remember it. Besides some of his frenzied thoughts right after Leo was gone, Raph had never really felt like an animal. But even then, it hadn't been like…whatever the fuck *that* had been. He was a person. He and his brothers and the other mutants might not be human, but they *were* people. Raph knew this without a shadow of a doubt.

He was just…overwhelmed. That had to be it. God, this must have been what Mikey was talking about. Being so close to all these upset people, it was getting to him. Messing him up. He cleared his throat and swiped at his tears, trying to clear his head.

But in turning his head to dry his face with his sleeve, he caught Splinter looking at him. His heartbeat that had already started slowing kicked back up a notch, because for the first time in so, so long, his dad was looking at him with *pride*.

Fuck, he'd almost forgotten what that looked like. He wanted to bask in it, gather up every ounce of it and hold it close. His dad was *proud* of him.

Raph was so blindsided by it that it was several long moments before he stopped to question why his father would be looking at him like that.

He thinks you're crying for Leo.

Oh. Fuck.

Raph averted his gaze and tried to focus on the growing pile of flowers at the base of Leo's statue. *Fuck*. His dad's pride was just a mistake. Raph hadn't earned it. Raph wasn't embarrassed to be seen crying, he wasn't *entirely* a slave to toxic masculinity, but he'd do just about anything to go back and keep himself from starting. The momentary rush he'd felt seeing his dad look at him with anything other than disappointment wasn't worth the wrong message those tears had sent.

Raph couldn't dwell on it, though. Mikey had started crying harder than ever. Raph was nearly holding up Mikey's entire weight at this point. Donnie had placed a shaking hand on Raph's shoulder. Donnie was doing a good job of not making it obvious, but Raph had become a replacement for Donnie's staff, steadying his brother. Raph didn't mind. He wouldn't get tired. His brothers could use him as a crutch, both physical and emotional, as long as they needed. Raph was here. Raph was here now.

Mikey fell asleep on the drive home, completely exhausted by the night's events. Donnie looked on the verge of it too, and Raph had to cajole them both out of the car when it came to a stop. The underground journey back to the Lair was just as silent as the departure had been so many hours ago. Once inside, everyone quietly dispersed and headed to their own rooms.

The turtles' rooms all shared the same hallway, giving Raph the chance to give each of his brothers one last hug.

"Thanks, Raph," Mikey mumbled into Raph's chest.

"Yeah," Donnie said, his voice hoarse. "I know…I know that sucked."

"It's fine."

“You keep saying that word. I do not think it means what you think it means,” Donnie said in a scarily accurate impression of Inigo Montoya. Being one of the only DVDs they had for a while in their early childhood, they’d all seen the Princess Bride about a billion times. Raph couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever you nerd,” Raph laughed, giving Donnie a playful little nudge. “Go hit the hay, you guys.”

They went their separate ways, and it wasn’t until Raph was safely on the other side of his bedroom door that he let out a shaky breath. Donnie was right. It hadn’t really been fine, but Raph wouldn’t change his decision to go. It had been the right thing to do. It’s what Leo would have done.

He stripped off his fancy clothes and crawled into bed with all the grace of a drunk. It had been a *fucking* day. Within minutes of hitting his pillow, Raph was asleep.

Raph was in Leo’s room.

No. He was in *their* room. His own bed was still here. Mikey and Donnie’s, too. Nerf darts and stickers still clung to the pipes overhead. Donnie’s bed tent glowed, casting a soft orange light throughout the room. One of Mikey’s extra-soft, extra-colorful blankets dangled from his bunk above Raph’s bed. It hadn’t looked like this in years.

Oh. This was a dream. That’s why. Raph knew it was a dream because Leo was here.

Leo was sitting on the floor. That couldn’t be very comfortable. Why was he on the floor when his bed was right there? If he just got up, he could lay down on the mattress. Leo looked like he could use it. He looked tired and stiff.

Either instantly or an eternity later, Leo looked up and locked eyes with Raph.

“Hey,” Leo smiled, and the entire room seemed to get softer. The amber glow deepened, like someone had extinguished all the other lights but the ones inside Donnie’s tent. It felt cozy. Warm. Good. Safe.

“Hey, Leo,” Raph said. He watched Leo’s entire body relax. Maybe the floor wasn’t that uncomfortable after all. Raph decided to join him.

Sitting across from his brother now, Raph had the vague understanding that this was one of those weird dreams where things were somehow different, slightly off and wrong, but you still knew what they were supposed to be. Leo was Leo, but also *not*. Leo wasn’t this pale. Leo wasn’t this worn-out. They were sitting, but Raph could tell this Leo was taller. There were other things, other inexplicable signs that this wasn’t Leo as Raph knew him, but Raph couldn’t make them out in the dimness of the room.

It was still Leo, though. Dull and rimmed with dark bags as they were, those were still his eyes. That was still his smile.

“You did good today,” Leo beamed at Raph.

“No I didn’t.”

“Don’t say that, Raph. That’s not true.”

“I’m not a *liar*,” Raph snarled.

Leo just looked at him, his expression unreadable.

“I’m not a liar,” Raph repeated, less angry and more desperate. “*I’m not.* I’m not *lying*.”

“I know you aren’t,” Leo finally said. “You’re the most honest person I know. I don’t think this would work if you weren’t.”

Raph didn't understand what Leo meant. All that mattered is that Leo knew he wasn't lying. Raph wasn't a liar.

"But you helped our brothers even though it was hard for you. That was good, Raph. Really good."

Raph wasn't going to argue with Leo. He soaked in his brother's praise, and Raph couldn't help but feel proud of himself. Leo's bright smile returned.

They sat there for a while, just breathing, just looking at each other. Raph hoped he never woke up.

"You're gonna have to, though," Leo laughed softly.

Why? What was the point? Leo was here. Not *there*.

"Because I might go *all* the way insane if you don't."

Raph didn't understand that either. He didn't care though. This was great. This was the best dream about Leo he'd had in years. All the others had always been terrible.

"I'm sorry," Leo said, strained. "I didn't mean to do that. I wish you hadn't seen any of that. I think I did it to one of the others the other night. I can't always…keep to myself. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I don't like it, but it's better than never seeing you."

Leo looked at a spot on the floor somewhere in the space between them. Raph wondered what he was thinking. It didn't seem fair that Leo apparently knew what Raph was thinking without him saying it, but Raph couldn't do the same for Leo.

"You'll get there," Leo chuckled, finally looking back at Raph. "It's easier for me. I don't have much else to do. Not a lot of distractions in here."

They sat there for a little while longer, just enjoying each other's company. Leo hummed a little, some nonsensical tune. After some indeterminable amount of time, Raph tried to bring Leo into clearer focus, but with very little luck. There was something there, something on or near him that he couldn't quite see. It was something that shouldn't be there. It made him uneasy.

"You don't have to worry about that. I won't let it hurt you." Leo said dismissively.

"Okay," Raph relented. If Leo didn't want him to worry about it, he wouldn't. They both had enough to worry about as it was.

"*Tell* me about it!" Leo laughed. It made Raph feel light. Things couldn't be *too* bad if Leo could still laugh.

"I'll try to remember that," Leo said softly after his fit of laughter had died down.

"I wonder if you'll remember *this* this time," Leo wondered out loud, probably for Raph's benefit since Raph couldn't hear Leo's thoughts. "I don't wanna brag, but I'm really starting to get pretty good at this. I even knocked on dad's door for you earlier."

"That was you?"

"Yeah, you called me. It's usually the other way around. But I was so excited that I think I overdid it because then I couldn't feel you for a while."

'Called' him? When had Raph called him? Leo definitely hadn't called *him* recently. Leo didn't have a phone anymore. It had been found, discarded so he couldn't be tracked. He remembers the feds telling his dad this.

"I know I say it every time, but I'm *so* sorry about dad, Raph. I wish…I wish I could get through to him, too. But I can't. Only you guys, and mostly just you. I don't know why."

"Oh," was all Raph could think to say.

“Raph, can you do me a favor?”

Of course. Raph would do anything for Leo.

“Could you please, *please* watch something other than weightlifting and wrestling on YouTube? Seriously, literally *anything* else. I don’t care if you start watching anime with Donnie, I just *cannot* take one more video about ‘*gains and reps, bro’*.”

Raph laughed at Leo’s gravely impression of a gym bro. Leo scooted forward on the floor until he was close enough to reach out and clasp a hand on Raph’s shoulder. Raph leaned into the touch.

“Please, Raph. Broaden your entertainment horizons. I’m fucking begging you.”

“Oh my god, *Leo!* Did you just say *fuck?!*” Raph laughed, shocked and incredulous. It was too much. Leo *never* cussed. It was so out of character that Raph couldn’t stop laughing. He felt a stitch in his side, tears of mirth gathering in the corners of his eyes, the uncontrollable heaving for breath as he laughed and laughed and laughed.

Raph woke feeling light. He’d had a good dream. He couldn’t really remember it, but he was glad to have been spared one of his regular nightmares about Leo.

He looked at his phone to see that he’d slept in. They had been out pretty late, after all. He went to his messages and pulled up the group text between Donnie, Mikey and himself. The last message was from more than a week ago. Just like all the others before it, it had been about who was picking up what from the bodega on the way home from their individual extracurriculars.

Things were different now, though. Raph had known that after last night, he and his brothers weren’t going to go back to the way they’d been. He shot them both a text.

Raph:

Hey, you guys wanna watch something?

Donnie:

Who is this and what have you done with Raph

Mikey:

The real Raph has no appreciation for the cinematic arts, imposter

Raph:

Well, maybe its time I got some

Donnie:

Whaaaaat brought this on dude?

Raph:

I dunno. Just feel like it might be fun. You guys down or what?

Soon enough, Raph found his room once again occupied by his brothers, Donnie's laptop queued up with some pretentious Oscar bait movie he and Mikey had been going on about forever. Raph still wasn't really sure why he'd initiated this, but as the film's opening score swelled, Raph couldn't help but feel like he was finally, *finally* doing things right.

Chapter End Notes

Gasp, Leo is alive!

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Art by @Stallactite Twitter
- Art by Fox.fox.fox.fox piece #1 and piece #2

Chapter 7: Must Be Some New Guy

Chapter Notes

Heads up: non-graphic description of an injury coming up. This injury will be described more graphically in a later chapter, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



"Raphael, this is all *so* excellent to hear."

Raph had just finished recounting the events since his previous session with Dr. Hart. So much had happened that their time was already halfway up. Raph watched Dr. Hart's expression brighten as he explained the dramatic shift that had occurred.

Since the anniversary, Raph had felt like he was suddenly living an entirely new life. He and his brothers had drifted apart slowly over the years, but their reunion had happened at what felt like warp speed. Raph had gone from barely avoiding a Donnie-induced panic attack one day, to feeling a rush of happiness each time Donnie spoke to him. Raph couldn't remember the last time Mikey had given

him so much as a high five, and now Raph was serving as Mikey's personal jungle gym like they were kids again.

Raph had been reunited with two of his three brothers. If it felt *this* good to have Donnie and Mikey back, Raph couldn't imagine how content and complete he'd feel once Leo was home again someday.

But for now, Raph could hardly believe his turn of fortune. This was as good as things had been since Leo had been taken. Raph was actually *hanging out* with his brothers again. To Raph's surprise, their movie nights had become one of his new favorite activities. It wasn't that he hated movies and tv series; he'd just never had the same amount of interest in them as Donnie and Mikey. Even if he hadn't particularly enjoyed whatever his brothers had picked to watch, Raph still always felt an odd sense of contentment and satisfaction as the credits rolled.

"I'll be honest," Dr. Hart said with a smile, "this is not what I expected us to be talking about today. I'm *very* happy for you, Raphael."

Raph had to agree that this felt completely out of left field. He had left his last visit feeling frustrated and guilty. Dr. Hart typically ended their sessions with some type of 'homework'; something for Raph to focus on until he saw her next. After he'd once again established that he had not and *would* not agree that Leo was dead, Dr. Hart had given him the assignment of keeping stock of his feelings before, during, and after the anniversary.

Whenever he had "journaling" homework, Raph usually wrote things down in a password locked note on his phone. Early on, Raph hadn't even attempted to hide his eye rolls whenever given this task. Writing down his "feelings" had seemed like *the* dumbest and most stereotypical therapy bullshit on the planet.

However, he'd found that jotting down just one or two emotions, or even just concepts, sometimes helped them structure sessions. They could be used as a launching point for discussion, or they'd hone in on one particular emotion and focus on the event or circumstances that had caused it for the entire session. In time, Raph found this to be one of the least painful ways to begin a visit with Dr. Hart.

When he'd left last time, he had expected his list of feelings from the ensuing two weeks to be things like *frustrated, angry,* and *lonely*. After Donnie had yelled at him in the sewers the day before the anniversary, Raph had written '*fucked up*' in the note. It was the only thing on the list in the "before" section. Sparse as that may have been, Raph thought it was a pretty succinct summary of just how low he'd felt.

But that had been before Donnie had come to him on the eve of the anniversary to apologize. After that, everything changed. The “during” and “after” sections ended up with more feelings and concepts listed than Raph thought he’d ever written.

During

- *Present*
- *Determined*
- *Nervous*
- *Scared*
- *Bad*
- *Panic attack (long)*
- *Protective*
- *Useful*

After

- *Feel like brothers again*
- *Good*
- *Included*
- *Connected*
- *Appreciated*
- *Anxious*

Showing the list to Dr. Hart, Raph wished he’d deleted that last bullet point. Dr. Hart had said it herself; reconnecting with Donnie and Mikey was excellent. He hadn’t felt this happy in years. So why did he still feel so anxious about spending time with his brothers?

“I would be more surprised if you *weren’t* nervous to completely embrace this development, though,” Dr. Hart told him.

“Wait, really?” Raph was genuinely surprised.

“You’re still very young, but you’ve already experienced so many dramatic changes in your life. Some good, and some bad. It’s not unusual for so much upheaval in such a short amount of time to make even positive changes feel daunting. It’s understandable that you would feel apprehensive.”

“Oh…Yeah, I guess that makes sense…And I guess it’s just like…a *lot* of stuff changing all at once. But also not, because it’s kinda going back to the way things were before with Donnie and Mikey. Hanging out and talking again. But I’m not exactly…y’know, who I was before anymore. So it’s the same, but different?”

Dr. Hart simply nodded. Raph had learned that this meant she wanted him to continue.

“I dunno, I guess I didn’t used to think that people could really change. But I know that I have. That’s the whole reason Don and Mike are even talking to me again. They know I’m not gonna bite their heads off over every stupid little thing anymore.”

“When you finally opened up to the idea of learning to let go of your anger,” Dr. Hart began, “you told me that you wanted to stop having outbursts at your brothers. All of your efforts are finally bearing fruit. Sometimes it’s hard to step back and appreciate it when we’ve finally accomplished something we’ve been working towards for so long.”

"Yeah…I guess,” Raph said, unconvinced but wanting to move on. He felt like he *did* appreciate that his work was finally paying off, though. He knew he’d finally reached his goal with his brothers; he’d even spelled it out for Donnie how hard he’d worked and how rarely he let his anger get the best of him now.

And yet the constant, dull thrum of anxiety remained. It was always there, looming in the background, underscoring everything he did. It was easier to ignore at times, especially when he was with his brothers, but it was still always just *there*.

“Let’s circle back to the list. On the day of the anniversary before “panic attack”, you wrote “bad”. You felt this when you were talking to your father?”

Raph knew it was pitifully vague, and that Dr. Hart wanted him to elaborate. Raph hesitated.

“You know that I am not able to discuss specifics of what we talk about here with your father. Just general updates about progress or setbacks. Anything you say about him stays here.”

“I know, I know, I know,” Raph grumbled. Dr. Hart said nothing. This was one of her tricks; she knew Raph couldn’t stand the awkward silence, so he’d be forced to fill it.

“He just…he still thinks I’m lying.”

“And that upsets you because you don’t think you are.”

*I don’t ‘think’, I **know***, Raph wanted to say. He didn’t feel like getting combative with Dr. Hart today, not when she seemed so happy with the amount of headway he’d made since his last visit. Instead, he just nodded his head.

“Your father has had difficulty trusting you and your brothers in the past. Granted, some of that *has* been warranted.”

“Yeah, I know,” Raph relented. During their pursuit of Superfly, he and his brothers had lied to Splinter for weeks about why they were spending so much time on the surface. And before that, they’d regularly lied about how long their shopping trips took; a habit Leo had eventually forced them to break.

“But, you said he hasn’t been distancing himself from you quite as much as before.”

“Yeah, and it’s kinda freaking me out,” Raph said honestly.

He’d noticed it almost immediately after the anniversary. Raph and Splinter had been doing a delicate and awkward dance of never spending more time together than strictly necessary for ages now. If Raph came into the main room, Splinter would find a reason to vacate it and vice versa.

But Splinter seeing Raph cry at the remembrance had apparently given Splinter the ability to stand being in the same room as Raph for more than a few minutes. Not only that, but Raph was catching his father looking at him every so often *without* the usual mistrust and disappointment Raph had grown so accustomed to.

“He’s only acting like this because he thinks I’m finally cracking. Which I’m *not*,” Raph added emphatically.

“How you feel about Leonardo isn’t the only thing he cares about,” Dr. Hart disagreed. “You’ve managed to rekindle your relationship with your brothers. That’s a huge, positive step forward for all of you, and I can only imagine it’s something your father is happy to see.”

“I guess.”

“We’ve discussed before the negative outcomes that can result from Avoidance Coping. I understand how hesitant you are to initiate conversations with your father. But I think you can recognize by the severity of the panic attack you suffered on Thanksgiving that dodging the issue has only exacerbated it.”

“You don’t need to tell me that it’s my own fault I freaked out even harder than usual,” Raph quipped. He felt stupid about it enough already, and here Dr. Hart was telling him it all could have been avoided if he wasn’t such a chicken when it came to Splinter.

“I’m not saying you’re to blame, Raphael. Avoidance Coping is just another in a long list of additional symptoms people with Post-Traumatic Stress can develop. That being said, you can set yourself up for future success by allowing yourself to simply feel your feelings. You can and *will* survive an upsetting interaction with your father.”

After how long he’d been checked out on Thanksgiving, Raph wasn’t so sure that was true.

“I know you’re more than capable of doing difficult things. I often find my more athletic patients have an easier time persevering in circumstances that require a bit of discomfort to overcome. You’re used to training, and training isn’t always easy. ‘No pain, no gain’, right?”

“Yeah,” Raph sighed, agreeing. *God*, Dr. Hart was good. She just made it so easy to make all of this emotional stuff relatable for Raph. Envisioning a conversation with his dad as a workout or training session definitely made it seem less overwhelming. He knew sore muscles today meant stronger muscles tomorrow. Maybe if he could just reframe interacting with his dad as a particularly rough leg day or something…

“I can’t tell you what your dad is thinking,” Dr. Hart said, interrupting Raph’s sudden bizarre thought of bench pressing his dad, “but I would not be surprised if he extends an olive branch soon. Don’t be afraid to try and take it.”

Raph *was* afraid, though. He was sure that any attempts at finding some sort of middle ground with Splinter would only make the inevitable fallout worse. Raph didn't want to get his dad's hopes up just to bring them crashing down when Raph refused to "accept" that Leo was dead. Raph was sure that this would leave them off worse than they were already. Raph had made his choice at their last session. He was done ceding ground on this.

"However, I think we have an easier way to keep this momentum you've gained with your brothers going. I know you have plenty of friends at school, but you've described those relationships more or less stagnating over the last few months. Reengaging with your brothers could serve as a gateway to revitalizing your friendships, too. So, between now and next time, I'd love to see you focus on your friendships."

"Yeah, okay," Raph said. This assignment wouldn't be as easy as jotting down a few emotions in his phone, but she had a point. Raph felt like he was on a roll recently, and he *had* let his relationship with most of his friends languish. They all still talked and still hung out, but it had been a while since Raph himself made much of an effort to instigate any of it.

Not much later, Raph headed out of Dr. Hart's office feeling pretty decent, but also tired. With so much having happened since last time, it had been a dense session. He was more than ready to head home and just relax for the evening.

Dr. Hart's office was located in an old commercial factory building that had been converted into trendy, upscale loft-style office spaces. There was a collection of other practices here, and Raph knew that the majority of them served a clientele of a much higher tax bracket than Raph's family.

Raph and his brothers hadn't exactly had medical insurance when they'd entered the human world, let alone enough cash to pay out of pocket for such a swanky shrink as Dr. Hart, but it was Raph's understanding that this was another one of the mayor's expressions of gratitude. He wondered how long her goodwill would last, though, given that she was now two years in on footing Raph's bill.

Instead of heading for the main staircase leading to the ground floor exit, Raph made his way to the old service staircase that he knew was around the corner from another psychiatric specialist's office at the end of the hall. He swiftly made his way through the door and down several flights to the basement.

He'd found this more discrete escape route after his third session. The thought of someone seeing him exiting the front door of a building full of therapists and psychologists had nearly made Raph sick, so he'd fallen back on his ninja training to find a way out without being spotted. A quick survey of the basement had revealed a connecting passage into a dark, cavernous space beneath the sidewalk above.

They'd found places like this as kids when their main way of traversing the city was underground. Donnie's curiosity had led them to learn that New York had once been home to many underground workspaces such as this, where metal grates with small, circular holes laid on the sidewalks above. These "vault lights" had let natural sunlight into the subterranean factory rooms in a time before electricity. Now rendered useless, most of these spaces had been walled off or forgotten, the vault lights long ago paved over for modern concrete sidewalks.

For Raph and his family, neglected and discarded parts of the city like this had always been theirs for the taking. The Lair itself was a section of abandoned sewer, made obsolete by a massive overhaul of the city's infrastructure decades ago. As much as he loved being able to freely walk on the streets now, Raph still appreciated these hidden places that felt like they were just for him and his family.

Raph kept on the route he had plotted for himself two years ago. After squeezing through a few more tight spots, he came to a discrete opening to a subway station. From here, he could hop on a train that would take him home.

Raph made like most New Yorkers do and did his best to ignore everyone around him as he stepped onto the train. He and his brothers were regular fixtures of New York at this point, but it still didn't stop the occasional not-so-sneaky photo being snapped of him out in public. More often than not, it was tourists who made a scene about spotting Raph or any of the other mutants. He did a quick scan of the train car and only saw one or two people making any sort of obvious acknowledgement of his presence.

The curious attention usually didn't bother him too much, but Raph always left Dr. Hart's office feeling a little raw. He wedged himself into a seat, pulled the hood of his jacket over his head, and kept his eyes on his phone. He'd made it about a quarter of the way to his destination before a pair of *very* obvious tourists entered the car. Raph felt it as their eyes landed on him.

"Oh my god," the woman said, swatting at her boyfriend for his attention. When the guy looked at Raph, he gasped. "Holy shiiiiit!"

"You're like, our first celebrity sighting! Wow!" the girlfriend said, and the tourists were up in Raph's face before he could even brace for impact. The woman's phone was already out. Hopefully they'd leave him alone if he let them get a selfie. It happened sometimes, and as much as Raph hated it, it was usually the path of least resistance when dealing with pushy people. Not for the first time, Raph was jealous of human celebrities who had an easier time blending into the crowd.

Raph had expected one or both of them to sling an arm over his shell to pose for a selfie. Instead, the boyfriend reached for the collar of Raph's jacket and pulled downwards. Raph reeled back, his collar yanked out from the man's grasp and his heart suddenly thundering in his chest.

"Do you like, still have a *hole* in your shell? How's that even work? Do you have a scar on your neck from the swords?!"

Jesus fucking Christ, what was *wrong* with some people? He wanted to tell the guy to fuck off, but the girlfriend was obviously filming already. He didn't need some stupid video of him cussing out some tourists to go viral online, not when so much of his family's new lifestyle hinged on remaining in the public's good graces.

Even if there hadn't been the looming threat of a negative public image incident, he wasn't sure he'd be able to get anything out past the lump in his throat. Most people had the decency not to ask Raph about his very famous…*injury*. In fact, Raph couldn't remember the last time it had come up outside of a medical or therapy setting. Even his friends on the wrestling team never mentioned it, and they'd seen the aftermath every time Raph had changed in the locker rooms.

Nobody but doctors and nurses had ever tried to actually fucking *touch it.*

"Yo," a deep voice came from the left. Raph and the tourists turned to see a very large, very unamused looking New Yorker staring down at them. "Back off the turtle kid."

"Hey man, I was just—"

"Back *off*, motherfucker."

The local was now in the tourist's personal space, who didn't seem too happy now that the tables had turned. This guy had a good few inches and easily 150 pounds on the asshole who had touched Raph. The tourist was a fucking idiot, of course, but he was apparently *just* smart enough to know he was outmatched. He and his girlfriend shuffled away from Raph.

"Yeah okay dude, just chill out—"

“Get the fuck out,” the larger man said with a jerk of his head toward the doors. It had all happened so fast that they still hadn’t closed. The couple made a beeline for the exit, making it out just before the doors slid shut.

“You good?” the man said, cocking an eyebrow at Raph and holding his fist out.

Raph swallowed and cleared his throat, but still couldn’t speak. He nodded and quickly bumped the man’s fist with his own before tugging at his hood and looking down at his phone again. He wasn’t even focusing on the screen. He couldn’t even if he actually meant to, unsteady as it was in his shaking hand.

The man turned and held onto the rail above his head, effectively blocking Raph from view. He said nothing else as he stood there for the for the rest of Raph’s ride home. Raph wondered if the guy had missed his own stop just to keep shielding Raph. His hands had stopped shaking about four stops ago, but Raph still wasn’t sure he could speak. It wasn’t until they were finally at his stop that Raph attempted it.

“Thanks, man,” Raph said in a low, hoarse voice as he got up to leave. It felt pathetically inadequate.

“I got you, cuz,” the man said simply, nodding at Raph as he left the train. He kept his head low as he ducked around a corner and into one of the several hidden paths leading to the Lair. Nobody was around to see him here in the underbelly of the city, but Raph didn’t pull his hood off until he was stepping foot in the Lair.

Raph was extremely grateful for the overall uneventful evening that followed. Donnie and Mikey had been home for a while already, but had waited for Raph before queuing up something to watch. Splinter and Scumbug were out to dinner, and the boys enjoyed a frozen pizza puff dinner with a healthy side of Doritos in Mikey’s room while they watched some absurd anime Donnie had talked them into. There was lots of yelling and Raph didn’t really understand what was happening, but the giant robot fights were pretty cool.

Raph hadn’t realized he was idly rubbing his plastron until Mikey looked over at him.

“Is it sore?” Mikey asked, looking nervous and worried. Even Donnie tore his eyes away from the chaos on the screen long enough to cast an anxious glance at Raph.

“Nah, just itches a little,” Raph lied and waved off Mikey’s concern. “Don’t worry, Mike. I’m good.”

And he *was* good. It didn’t itch and it wasn’t sore. He wasn’t sure *why* he was touching it. Maybe it was just to prove to himself it wasn’t a big deal. He was here, safe in the Lair, watching a dumb show with his brothers. He couldn’t let some asshole with no filter get in his head. Raph was as good as he’d been in a long, long time.

They were in their old bedroom again.

It was dim, the glow of Donnie’s tent not quite as luminous as before. Raph thought it may have been a while since he was here last.

Raph wasn’t surprised to see Leo there on the floor, but he *was* surprised that Leo hadn’t looked at him yet. He thought they had both been here for a bit already, even if Raph just now realized it. Had Leo not noticed yet either? Raph wanted to see him smile again. He wanted the room to glow soft and warm like last time.

“Leo? I’m back.”

Finally, Leo looked at him. The bags under his eyes were darker.

“Heeeey,” Leo said, drawing the word out with a long exhale. After a couple breaths, he sighed and smiled up at this brother. “You remembered.”

“Sort of,” Raph grunted. “I remember last time now that I’m back here. But not when I was awake.”

“You remembered my request, though,” Leo chuckled weakly.

“I mean, only kind of,” Raph said, taking a seat on the floor across from Leo once again. “It was just like…a feeling. Not a memory.”

“Hmm,” Leo hummed. He seemed distant. Less engaged. He’d seemed happier to see Raph last time.

“I wanna remember this time,” Raph said, hoping that might cheer Leo up. “I don’t wanna just… forget once I wake up.”

“I want you to, too,” Leo agreed.

“Yeah,” Raph answered lamely. Just then, he noticed Leo was cradling his elbow and trying very hard to look like he wasn’t. “You look like shit.”

“Just…y’know, overdid it today.”

Raph knew he should ask more. There were a lot of things he wanted to know. He just couldn’t think of them right now. It felt like his brain was wading through mud.

“It’s because you’re asleep,” Leo told him. “We don’t really think clearly in dreams.”

“This sucks,” Raph grumbled. He wanted to have a proper conversation, not one where his thoughts felt like syrup. “Are you dreaming too?”

“No, I’m awake. Actually, I’m not even sure you’re dreaming. You *are* asleep though. I can only do this when you’re asleep.”

“If I’m not dreaming, what is this then?”

“I don’t *know* Raph, they don’t tell me how this works! They expect me to tell *them*,” Leo growled, and Raph was taken aback by the venom in Leo’s voice. Leo had cussed last time, and now this? Raph wasn’t sure why, but it made him feel guilty, like somehow Leo’s attitude was *his* fault. Leo must have sensed Raph’s unease, because he heaved another sigh before apologizing.

“I’m sorry, Raph. I didn’t mean to snap at you. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay,” Raph agreed. He felt like maybe he should have fought harder to get Leo to explain who ‘they’ were, but it was just so hard to think. And it was nice to just be here with Leo.

“This is nice for me too.”

“Leo?”

“Hmm?”

“Why aren’t you sitting on your bed?”

“What?” Leo asked. “What bed?”

“Right behind you,” Raph pointed. “Your bed. Under the arch.”

Leo’s eyebrows shot up.

“You see our room?”

“Yeah. All our stuff is still here.”

“Whoa,” Leo sounded amazed. “You’ve never told me you could see it before.”

“Why shouldn’t I see it? We’re both here.”

"…no we aren't, Raph. You're asleep in your room."

"Why can't I see where you really are?"

It was a long moment before Leo spoke. He looked pained and, to Raph's surprise, *angry* as he answered.

"Because I don't *want* you to."

Raph woke feeling agitated. Fuck, was he *still* messed up over that asshole tourist? He'd already decided the night before that he wouldn't let himself get worked up over it, but apparently it hadn't worked. He rolled out of bed and headed for the dojo, thinking maybe he could work out this frustration before heading to school.

When they had expanded the Lair, the new mutants helped the turtles convert another area of decommissioned sewer into a hybrid dojo/gym area. Sometimes when they were kids and Splinter had needed some peace and quiet, he'd send the kids to go play "in the big room". It was about a city block away from their main living area; far enough away that Splinter wouldn't be bothered by their playful yelling, but close enough that when things inevitably got too rough, they didn't have to go too far to come crying back to their dad with a scraped knee.

When they'd started getting older, they'd suggested moving their main living quarters down here, but Splinter had wanted to remain in the original Lair. Splinter's ears were just far more sensitive than the turtles, and Raph could understand how the echoes in this overlarge sewer chamber could have been overwhelming for him.

Instead, it had turned out great as a gym. Rocksteady and Bebop helped Raph with the weights and equipment, and Leo and Splinter had acquired mats to line the floor. It was a luxury they'd never really had before, and Raph appreciated the soft squishiness beneath his feet as he began warming up.

This was one of the few places Raph chose to forego human clothes. He never really felt naked; they'd grown up not wearing clothes, after all, and sometimes it felt stranger wearing them than not. Frankly, their shells made most clothes that weren't extremely oversized feel pretty constricting. It took a lot of effort to find clothes that fit comfortably. But ever since Leo had been taken and Raph had been shot on live television…well, he'd chosen to keep his shell and plastron covered nearly always no matter how uncomfortable some shirts were.

Raph wasn't embarrassed—it had been a fucking cheap shot and scars were badass—but he hated the way it made people look at him. This morning, Raph couldn't help but take a slightly longer look at himself in the massive wall mirror. Leo had insisted on installing it for watching his own form and movements.

The bullet had entered through his carapace, traveled through the soft tissue of his trapezius muscle, and exited through his upper righthand plastron scute. Before the incident, Raph had been vaguely aware of the fact that gunshot exit wounds were usually slightly worse than the entry. He'd probably picked that up from some CSI show or something. "Slightly worse" apparently had been an understatement.

The scute just below Raph's shoulder had been almost completely obliterated. He had spent weeks with his arm immobilized, pins and wires holding together what was left of this section of plastron. Even then, much of the wound had needed to be reinforced with epoxy to fill the cavities left by missing pieces. In the end, Raph had wound up with a spiderweb of patched cracks and gaps that left the surface of his upper right scute rough and gnarled. It made the old X shaped scar on his left side look like a cat scratch in comparison.

Looking at the old injury now, Raph was angry at himself for getting so freaked out on the train. Raph didn't even think about it much anymore. Thanks to their mutation, it had healed quickly. Physical therapy for his shoulder had gone smoothly and hadn't lasted long. It honestly looked way worse than it felt these days, though the same couldn't be said for when it had happened.

The reason he kept it out of sight wasn't because it bothered him, or that he was self-conscious about the way it looked. He kept it covered because to everyone but him, it was the source of all his problems.

Everyone from Splinter to Dr. Hart thought that *this* was the reason Raph was the way he was. Dr. Hart had tried to explain it to him over and over, that the combination of the traumatic event and traumatic injury had become subconsciously connected for Raph, that the wound was linked to his inability to process the loss of Leo. They all believed that Raph had been in shock from the injury just after Leo disappeared, and was therefore unable to process it while everyone else who had witnessed it with a clear head could.

Raph knew it was bullshit.

This wasn't *trauma*. This wasn't *shock*. This wasn't *Post-Fucking-Traumatic Stress*. Raph just knew Leo wasn't gone, and it had absolutely nothing to do with his fucked up shell.

They'd done all sorts of therapy garbage to try and get him to "accept" the wound as part of himself, following the logic that it would help him accept Leo's death. It had all seemed insane to Raph, because he *had* accepted the injury. He didn't mind scars, and he didn't mind physical therapy. They were ninja; they trained hard, they leapt from rooftop to rooftop, and they scaled buildings. They'd had all sorts of injuries growing up from poorly timed jumps or missed landings. Sure, getting shot had been a new level of injury, but it hadn't been anything Raph couldn't handle.

So why had he flipped out when the guy tried to touch it? If he was so okay with it, why did he always keep it covered? Why were mornings alone in the Lair's dojo the only place he went shirtless anymore?

Because nobody sees it the way you do, Raph realized as he looked at himself in the mirror. *It's just like Leo. Everyone else is wrong about it.*

To everyone else, this scar was the physical embodiment of Raph's…*mental illness*. To Raph, it was a reminder of just how isolated he was. He didn't need people looking at it to remind him, and he sure as hell didn't need people touching it.

But maybe…maybe this was more of that Avoidance Coping crap Dr. Hart was always going on about. What if not letting people see it was making it worse? But at the same time, how could letting people see it help if all it did was remind them of how messed up Raph was?

Because even though Raph knew he wasn't wrong about Leo, he could acknowledge that he wasn't… completely okay. Therapy wasn't all Leo, all the time. Raph had been so angry and so aggressive that when things had been tough, he'd ended up punching his friend Tim. He had pushed his brothers away because they feared his rage. He had absolutely destroyed his relationship with his dad. And Raph couldn't deny the panic attacks, *or* the constant anxiety living just under his skin.

Would it be so bad for people to know? Would it be the end of the world if someone saw him walking out of Dr. Hart's office building after a session?

Yes it fucking would, part of him whispered, but Raph knew that maybe he was onto something here. Telling Donnie about his panic attacks had been terrifying, but somehow a massive relief. He hadn't had the chance to tell Mikey before he'd witnessed one, and as humiliating as it had been, he was glad Mikey knew now, too.

Now, Donnie and Mikey were always checking in on him. Asking him how he was, if he was alright, how his day was. It had been a little annoying and embarrassing at first, but Raph had to admit it was an extremely welcome change of pace. They would have never started doing that if Raph hadn't been vulnerable in front of them.

And that was it. He needed to be *vulnerable* in front of other people. Unlike with Mikey, now he could *choose* how to express that vulnerability. He didn't need to lead with "*yes hello everyone, I have debilitating panic attacks on the regular."* He could start much, much smaller.

He still practiced with the wrestling team and still jogged with Tim. He worked out in the school's weight room sometimes, too. Maybe he should ditch the Under Armor he usually wore. Plenty of his classmates jogged without their shirts. Surely it wouldn't be that big a deal.

But Raph's confidence started to wane as he finished up his morning workout and hopped in the shower. Watching the way the water rolled unevenly over the rough surface of his plastron, he thought maybe letting his scar be seen wasn't small enough. What if he was just more open with people? What if he told people he was having a shitty day, or that some asshole freaked him out on the train? What if he just started…talking?

But *who* would he talk to? He loved Tim and Jason, but they were fucking morons. Their scores on emotional intelligence would probably be about as low as their math tests. Faisal and Keno were nice guys, but they would be *way* too touchy feely about everything and blow it out of proportion. Raph was still friends with April and her best friend Irma…but Raph had bothered April enough with his shit.

Raph was talking with his brothers more, but he didn't want to dump *everything* on them. They had their own shit to deal with. Raph knew they were wrong, but they still very much believed Leo was dead. He didn't want to push things now that they'd all started feeling like brothers again.

Raph's waffling lasted for the rest of the morning. He hadn't come up with any sort of plan of attack by the time Mikey was calling him from down their shared sewer tunnel. This…this could be a problem for another day. Honestly, Raph had really *only just* realized that he was even open to the idea of sharing more about his struggles; he didn't need to jump in feet first right away.

He had mentally shelved the issue by the time he mounted the stairs of Eastman High with his brothers. They rounded the corner past the main doors to head toward their lockers, passing the main office as they did.

Through the window of the office, Raph saw that an older kid with dark hair and dark clothes was standing at the front desk. He was being handed a stack of papers by the receptionist, the sheet on top clearly a map as she pointed toward something. The kid's face turned to look in the direction she was indicating, and Raph realized he didn't recognize him.

"Who's that?" Raph asked, nudging Donnie. Raph wasn't the best with names and faces, but Donnie seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of everyone at Eastman. He even knew the names of the night time cleaning staff.

"I dunno," Donnie shrugged. "Must be some new guy."

"Kind of a weird time to be transferring, right?" Mikey said. "I mean, Christmas break is like, almost here. Why not wait til the next semester?"

"Dunno," Donnie shrugged again, looking at his phone.

"Maybe we should like, say hi or offer to show him around or something," Mikey said. "I mean, I remember how scary it was coming in at the end of freshman year."

"I'm sure he's fine, Mike. Plus the guy probably doesn't want a bunch of attention, and we aren't exactly low key," Raph laughed.

Just then, Raph's buddy Tim came around the corner.

"Whoa, Tim? You're like, never here this early," Raph said, greeting his friend with a playful, light punch to the shoulder. Tim rubbed his arm, exaggerating the movement. He'd had a ball making Raph's *actual* punch from two years ago into a joke, always dramatically reacting any time Raph touched him. He was such an idiot, and Raph loved him for it.

“My buddy’s transferring in today!” Tim said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder towards the office. “Gonna give him the tour and junk. I’ll introduce you at lunch!”

“Cool,” Raph said, waving him off as Tim went to open the office door. He heard Tim address his friend by his last name as Raph and his brothers started to walk away. Raph knew the chances weren't good if he was a friend of Tim's, but if Raph was going to have to start sitting with him at lunch, he sure hoped this “Jones” guy wasn’t *too* much of an idiot.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Man, I just love Mutant Mayham Leo so much! He’s my favorite turtle!

Also me: *writes a fic entirely from Raph’s perspective that Leo has barely been in so far*

AWESOME FAN ART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Comic by @halfshellman Tumblr

Chapter 8: Twins

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: some unintentional/minor self-harm coming up. I've added Self Harm to the tags as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph had almost forgotten that Tim was bringing his friend to sit with them at lunch until he spotted them filtering into the cafeteria with the crowd.

Raph was already seated with Faisal and Jason, his own tray packed to the brim with food. He ate a lot these days, and he never understood why some of his classmates griped about the food here. Raph and his brothers had grown up with a 'kitchen' that consisted of a mini fridge with a hot plate on top. They hadn't even owned an oven until after the Superfly ordeal. Raph knew not to take a freshly cooked hot meal for granted. He was digging in by the time Tim and the new guy came up to the table with their own trays.

“Hey guys, this is my buddy Casey. He just transferred in,” Tim said, nodding to the guy next to him. He was tall and broad, and hair stuck out in wild angles from underneath a backwards baseball cap. He looked like an athletic type, which was unsurprising being a friend of Tim’s. He looked a little on the grungy side, but who was Raph to judge? He had literally grown up in a sewer. The guy grinned coolly as he addressed the table.

“Alright if I join y’guys?” Casey asked with a thick Brooklyn accent.

“Yeah dude, for sure,” Faisal said, sliding down to make room for the newcomer. He plopped down directly across from Raph, who braced for the usual ‘human meeting a mutant for the first time’ awkwardness to begin. Sure enough, the new guy looked Raph up and down and squinted for a moment as Raph tried to nonchalantly keep eating. Suddenly, his eyes widened.

“Heeey, we’re twins!”

Raph hastily swallowed the bite he’d just taken, coughing a little as he choked out “*what?*”

Casey chuckled as he hooked a finger into his lip, pulling it up to reveal a single missing tooth. Without removing his finger, he smiled and attempted to speak.

“Missin’ toof twins.”

The laugh that tore out of Raph was so unexpected that he nearly hacked up the bit of pizza he’d just swallowed. Casey grinned.

“Yeah, we’re the spitting image of each other,” Raph laughed. “How’d you lose yours?”

“Hockey,” Casey said, biting into a fry. “That’s how I know Tim. We played together as kids until he wussed the fuck out and started *wrestling*.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, them’s fightin’ words, man,” Raph said, pointing an accusatory finger at Casey but smiling all the while. “Wrestling is fucking *awesome*.”

“Sure, if you like rollin’ around on the floor! Nah man, I’d rather come at someone like a fuckin’ missile. Can’t do that on a wrestling mat.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that,” Raph laughed. “I elbow dropped a gangster from a 10 foot drop once and it was like, the greatest moment of my life.”

“That’s sick. Was that when you and your brothers were tracking down that fly dude?”

Raph felt the table jostle suddenly underneath him.

“Sorry,” Tim said, overly loud.

“You okay?” Raph asked. Tim looked off.

“Yeah, sorry, leg spasm. I should like, y’know, loosen it up. You wanna maybe do some laps with me before practice or something, Raph?”

“Yeah, why not,” Raph shrugged.

“You run?” Casey asked.

“Yeah yeah yeah, turtles are slow, heard it all before buddy,” Raph waved his hand dismissively, taking another bite of his pizza. He cocked an eyebrow at Casey and said with a full mouth “You’re gonna have to get better material.”

Casey laughed.

“Hey, no, I saw you guys in action on the news back during the fly mutant thing. You guys were like, ‘*kung fu fighting, fast as lightning*’. It was awesome.”

“Sorry guys, Casey’s my new best friend,” Raph said, pointing a piece of pizza crust at Casey. “The rest of you haven’t showered me in this much praise since freshman year.”

“Yeah, listen, the hero worship phase only lasted until we all saw you eat shit on your skateboard like a month into the semester,” Tim laughed. “Won’t be long before Casey realizes you’re just as dumb as the rest of us.”

“Don’t listen to these guys, Casey. They definitely kissed the ground I walked on for at least *two* semesters, and I am fucking *awesome* at skateboarding.”

“So that’s not how you lost *your* tooth, huh?” Casey grinned, looking skeptical.

“Ha! No, this dental disaster is courtesy of my idiot brother.”

“I’m gussin’ the one with the nunchakus, right? Those things look like they were *made* for removing teeth.”

Raph tossed his head back to laugh. God, this guy was a fucking riot. Why hadn’t Tim ever brought him around before?

“Yeah, Mikey *does* seem like he’d be the prime suspect,” Raph laughed. “But no, it was *Leo*.”

“The one with the swords?”

“Yeah,” Raph grinned. “We had like, wooden training weapons when we were kids, and one day he was trying this new move and *wham*. Hurt like a bitch, but holy fuck was it worth it to watch him get chewed out by our dad.”

“Okay but your dad gave you weapons in the first place, soooo I’m not sure Leo’s the real culprit here,” Casey said with a conspiratorial air.

“Right?!” Raph was laughing so hard he almost missed it as Casey glanced down at his phone. Raph saw him read a text before quickly setting it face down and looking at Tim.

“So, you still skateboard or what?” Casey asked before finally digging into his meal in earnest, giving Raph the opportunity to brag about the superior skateboarding terrain of the sewers. The conversation flowed easily, and Casey had slid so easily into Raph’s friend group that before he knew it, lunch was over.

Raph’s friends went their separate ways to their respective classes. Lunch had lightened Raph’s mood, but the apprehension he had felt earlier that morning came creeping back as the final bell rang and he headed to the locker rooms. He wanted to get there early, since Tim had said he wanted to do some laps before practice.

But the closer Raph got to the locker rooms, the more it began to sink in that this feeling was not just his nerves from this morning making a comeback. Something was…something was coming. Something he couldn’t hide from, couldn’t escape, because it was there. Always there. No matter what he did it was always *there* and he couldn’t *get rid* of it, couldn’t *fight* it, couldn’t keep himself from *giving in* whenever—

Oh fuck

The attack was coming on fast. *Too* fast. Raph needed to get *out*. He needed to get out of the building. He sped up, passing the entrance to the locker rooms and heading toward a set of doors that led to the school auditorium’s backstage. He knew that from there he could scale the rigging, make it to the stage’s lighting catwalk, over to the staircase, and up one flight more to the roof access door.

Raph’s knees hit the vinyl sheeting of the school’s roof. With his body running on auto pilot, he had barely registered the journey up here. But he hadn’t made it to his preferred hiding spot tucked between an elevator machine room and a ventilation shaft. It was a blind spot. He needed to get there so he wouldn’t be seen from any of the surrounding high rises. He forced himself to his feet to keep going.

He braced his elbow against the metal of the ventilation shaft as he slid back down to sit, now safely hidden. He briefly thought of putting both hands on the cold metal surface in an attempt to ground himself. He should be trying to stop this. He should start a breathing exercise. He should be thinking about how chilly the December air was in his lungs. He should be trying to stay here, *here*, *be here now*, be *here!*

Instead, he let it take him. He let the tremors evolve into full-body convulsions. He choked on nothing. He let himself gasp for breath when he knew, *knew* how to control his breathing. But he wouldn’t because he *deserved* this. He was *pathetic*. So desperate to be seen. So desperate to be

heard. So desperate to be touched, even if that touch was a hand *too tight* on his arm, dragging him from his cage. Because if he was being touched it meant he was real, he was *real*, he wasn't alone, it would *hurt*, but at least he wasn't *alone*—

Raph couldn't decipher the hysterical thoughts coursing through his brain like electricity, he only knew something was wrong, this was *wrong*, worse than normal, more intense than normal, scarier than normal. *This wasn't normal*. He rocked back and forth for a while, clutching at his chest, lost in feelings he couldn't name, couldn't place, couldn't understand.

Suddenly he was pitching forward, his hands flying to his neck. Something was there. It hurt. It wasn't supposed to hurt. Raph didn't know why, only knew that it wasn't supposed to. Someone… *someone* had told him it wouldn't hurt him. His fingers found the ghost of a scar, barely there. Raph gripped harder, digging the tips of his fingers in, trying to feel it, to feel something other than this desperate, *desperate* terror.

Do you have a scar on your neck from the swords?!

The tourist had asked him and Raph hadn't answered, but yes. He did. It was hardly noticeable, and Raph often forgot it was even there. It was nothing compared to his plastron. It had healed so quickly. It had needed only a few stitches. But it was there. Raph dug into it harder.

With the increased force, it now hurt enough to make Raph gasp. He panted for breath and found that he could finally, *finally* fucking breathe. He let his fingers relax, easing the pressure on the old wound. He brought his shaking hands away to look at them in horror.

It *scared* him. Raph *never* used pain as a grounding method. He had a high pain tolerance, much higher than his brothers and *significantly* higher than a human's. Mikey had cried and moaned and wailed when he'd been milked, but Raph had merely gritted his teeth and grunted a couple times when his turn had come. It had always been like that. He and Leo had always cried the least over childhood bumps and bruises, but Raph even less so than Leo.

Someone (probably Splinter) must have warned Dr. Hart of this, because she had been brutally frank with Raph early on about unhealthy coping mechanisms. She had warned him with stark, unreserved language about the dangerous path even the most minor physical self-harm could set him on. It had scared him, and he knew it was something that could never be an option for him.

But he hadn't even decided to do it. Not consciously. He didn't know why he'd grabbed his neck. The scar was insignificant. It didn't bother him. Why had he done that?

Hands still trembling, Raph reached into his pocket for his phone. He blinked away the tears in his eyes to focus on the screen. It had only been a few minutes. It was nowhere near the length of his last attack on Thanksgiving, but somehow felt more devastating. That one had been dissociative, but this? Raph wasn't sure what the fuck *this* had been.

Below the time on his home screen, Raph could see a text from Tim.

Tim:

Legs feeling better, let's skip the run. See you at practice!

Thank fuck. He had enough time to pull himself together before practice now that Tim had canceled on him. He let himself sag against the ventilation shaft. Raph unlocked his phone, fumbling with the passcode twice before entering it correctly, and went to his contacts. He pulled up Dr. Hart's contact.

He should tell Dr. Hart. Maybe she could make sense of this, because Raph *could not*. Why was this happening? Why now? Things had finally started getting *better*. Mikey and Donnie weren't scared of him anymore, but now Raph was scared of himself. Raph didn't want this. He didn't want to become this. He didn't want to hurt himself. Not because he feared pain, because he didn't. But he feared what it might mean and where it could lead. He was afraid of *anything* that could keep him from his goal.

And that goal was finding Leo. Raph was a senior, and he would be turning 18 shortly before graduating at the end of the next semester. Once Splinter was no longer his legal guardian and he had his diploma, Raph was getting the tracker in his shell fucking removed, packing up his shit, and setting out to find Leo. He'd search for the rest of his fucking life if he had to.

That's exactly why you can't tell her, Raph thought to himself. If he told Dr. Hart what he'd done to pull himself out, she'd call it a setback. Probably a *major* setback. What if they all used this as an excuse to keep him under their thumb? It wouldn't matter if he was legally an adult if he was still "a danger to himself." They would make him keep going to therapy, and they absolutely *would not* take his tracker out.

What if they tried putting him on something again? It had been a fucking disaster the first couple of tries. Human medication just didn't work with their mutated bodies. Everything they'd tried giving him to "help" him had either done nothing, or only made things worse. What if they thought this justified another round of experimenting with dosages? Raph couldn't go through that again. The panic attacks already took enough from him as it was. He didn't care if they meant well, Raph couldn't let a team of doctors fuck around with his head, dulling his senses and muddling his

emotions until they got it “right”. For some reason, the thought scared him now more than it ever had before.

Raph clicked his phone screen off. He wouldn’t call her. He wouldn’t tell her. This had to be a one-off. He had to get his head on fucking straight. Raph had to do this for Leo.

Fuck, *Leo*. His brother would be so *disappointed* in him. He hated seeing his brothers hurt. A new wave of shame rolled over Raph, and he rubbed furiously at his eyes to stop the tears from falling.

Raph shrugged off his backpack and reached inside, rooting through its contents until his hand found his water bottle. He popped off the cap, and knowing it was a good way to make himself sick, he had to keep himself from chugging the entire thing in one go. He dove his hand back in for a protein bar, glad to see his hands had mostly stopped shaking as he unwrapped it.

He ate slowly, taking small bites that he chewed methodically before swallowing. *This* was an appropriate grounding technique. Raph focused on the feeling of each bite in his mouth, how it felt on his tongue, between his teeth, as he swallowed. He was present, fully here, sitting on a rooftop, back against metal, eating a protein bar, one hand on a wrapper, the other splayed out on the vinyl beneath him.

Raph took another swig from his water bottle after finishing his snack, then heaved a couple heavy sighs before getting to his feet. He rolled his neck, still a little sore from his own grip, but he didn’t dare touch it again. Raph got his phone out once more to bring up the front-facing camera to check for damage.

Raph didn’t look great, but he looked better than he had expected. His eyes were hardly red, and he knew from experience they’d look more or less normal by the time he made his way back downstairs. His neck didn’t look bad either, the indents from his own fingernails already fading away. Overall, he just looked tired. He could work with this.

Giving himself just a few more minutes to settle down, Raph shot a text to Coach.

Raph:

Not feeling too hot. Ok to skip warmups?

Coach:

Sure. Can skip practice if you need to

Raph:

No, I'll be there.

When Raph had gone to his wrestling coach to say he was taking himself off the team at the start of the semester, Coach had proposed a way for Raph to stay involved.

"You're one of the best students I've ever coached," Coach had told him. *"And you're great at helping your teammates out. Why don't you stick around and help me with them?"*

Raph hadn't really understood what Coach meant at first, but after a few practices functioning as an unofficial assistant coach, it had started to click. Regardless of their current relationship, Raph still thought Splinter had always been a great teacher. Apparently his friends thought so, too, because Raph had started emulating his dad from the sidelines in the way he instructed them.

Raph had grown up training every day since he was a toddler. By now, Raph understood what kind of feedback helped not only him, but each of his brothers. He'd watched how Splinter's methods changed when doing one-on-one training with each of his sons. Whether it was getting more technical with Donnie, or describing the way a move should feel to Mikey, Raph had learned through watching his father that teaching was not a one-size-fits-all kind of thing.

So Raph did that with his teammates, adjusting the way he gave feedback for each of his friends. And he knew from *their* feedback that each of them appreciated it. After a few months of this, Coach had even sat Raph down and asked if he'd ever considered coaching as a career after school. Raph had not. Raph hadn't seriously considered *any* career options, because his future could only ever be one thing; finding Leo.

So no, Raph wasn't thinking about a career as a coach. Donnie had been scouting out colleges with engineering schools since Sophomore year. Mikey had always loved movies, but he'd started seriously talking about trying to break into them as a stunt man about a year ago. With how many movies used CGI, Mikey argued his shell wouldn't be a problem if he stuck to motion-capture stuff. By some miracle, Mikey had convinced Splinter that going to school for dual degrees in both film and acting wouldn't be a waste of time and money.

Raph thought those choices would be good fits for his brothers. He wanted his brothers to be happy. Raph would only be happy once he'd found Leo.

Raph was still trying to enjoy the time he had left here at Eastman, though. He liked helping Coach, and he liked helping his teammates. It made him feel useful and involved. Raph had made sure to let Coach know more than once how much he appreciated the opportunity. That's why he still participated in warm-ups with the team before practice. He didn't need to, not when he spent the whole practice coaching from the sidelines, but Raph loved participating in any way he still could.

Which is why he was determined to make it to practice. He got to his feet and dusted the grime from the roof off his pants. He made his way down the staircase, taking it all the way to the ground floor this time instead of descending the rigging. Taking the staircase was less direct because it would spit him out on the wrong side of the building, but Raph could take his time now.

By the time he made it to the locker room, everyone but Tim had already left to begin warmups in the gym. It seemed Tim had waited up for him. Raph appreciated the gesture until Tim looked at him with a double take.

"Whoa, Raph, you good dude?" Tim asked.

"Didn't sleep well last night. Guess it's catching up with me." Raph grunted, hating himself for the half-lie. Raph fucking hated lying. It hadn't been a problem for him growing up, but after everything with Splinter…well, Raph preferred to stick to the truth as much as possible.

"Aw man, bummer dude," Tim said as he grabbed his water bottle and shut his locker. "Want me to wait up for you?"

"Nah, already told Coach I was gonna skip warm-ups. Go on without me, I'll be there in a bit. Just need to change," Raph waved Tim off, who headed for the door.

He thought maybe Tim had changed his mind and come back for him, because he heard the door open again just a few moments later as he was pulling out his change of clothes. It didn't sound like Tim, though. Whoever this was had on heavier shoes. They sounded bigger, too. If Raph had hair, he thought it might rise on the back of his neck. Something felt strange.

Raph made to stand up until he saw who it was. Casey Jones rounded the corner of the row of lockers Raph was sitting at. He looked nervous. Raph didn't stand up, but he didn't let his shoulders completely untense, either.

"Uh, hey dude," Casey said awkwardly.

It was weird. Raph had only just met the guy, but he still felt like something was *off*. Raph tried to ignore the feeling and play it cool.

"What's up?"

"Listen, I just wanted to like…say sorry about lunch."

"What?" Raph chuckled. "Dude, I wasn't *actually* offended by the wrestling comment. It's not a big deal."

"No, not about that," Casey said. He avoided looking Raph in the eye, and Raph started to feel a familiar, terrible *something* in his chest. "I'm uh, sorry about asking about Leonardo. I won't bring him up again. I didn't know you don't like talking about him."

"That's *bullshit*."

Something inside Raph had snapped. It was as if every technique Dr. Hart had taught him to control his anger was gone, replaced by nothing but seething, uninhibited rage. He didn't remember standing up, but Raph was now on his feet.

"W-what?" Casey sputtered. He looked shocked as Raph tossed his gym clothes to the floor.

"Didn't you fucking hear me, shit for brains?" Raph said, stalking closer to Casey. He wasn't a small guy by any measure, but Raph was still bigger than him, and Raph drew himself up to make sure Casey fucking *knew* it.

"Whoa, what's your problem, dude? I'm just trying to apologize—"

"*My problem*," Raph said, invading Casey's personal space, "is that somehow everyone got this *stupid fucking idea* in their tiny little brains that they can't talk about Leo without me flipping the fuck out."

"You mean like you are right now? Back *off*, man."

Back off. Fuck. Hadn't…hadn't he just heard that?

Yesterday. The guy on the train. The one who got the tourist to fuck off. He'd said that. *Back off*. He'd protected Raph when someone got in his face. *Raph* was in someone's face now, though. What…what the fuck was Raph doing? Why was he doing this? He *did* need to back off.

But Raph's thought process had been too slow. He was still in Casey's face, and apparently it had been long enough that Casey felt it was necessary to *make* Raph back off. Raph was so distracted by his confused thoughts that he couldn't even *attempt* to block the fist Casey threw at his face.

Raph and the other mutants were pretty durable, but Casey had hit him *just so* that the inside of his mouth was cut by one of his teeth. Instantly, Raph's mouth was filled with blood. He stepped back and spat a mouthful on the floor, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand.

The smell of the blood was strong, and a memory came to the forefront of Raph's mind as he vaguely remembered Dr. Hart telling him once that smell was the strongest memory sense. He remembered another time he'd had a mouth full of blood; Leo knocking out his tooth as kids.

He must have looked insane, smiling with bloody teeth. He couldn't help it, though. It was a good memory.

"Jesus, maybe you *are* nuts," Casey muttered.

"Think you might be too," Raph laughed. "Been a while since a human took a swing at me."

"Fuuuuck me," Casey breathed, seeming to suddenly realize what he'd just done. "Fuck fuck fuck. Dude, *please* don't tell anyone I did that. I literally just got here, if my mom finds out I've *already* got in a fight again—"

“Nah,” Raph said, spitting again and taking a breath. “I uh, I needed that. Fuck, I’m sorry, man.”

“Are you for real right now?” Casey asked skeptically.

“Yeah, I swear dude…I fucked up, I’m sorry,” Raph stuck his hand out for Casey to shake.

Casey looked at him up and down, seeming to size Raph up as if that would determine whether or not he was lying. He must have seen something that made him take Raph at his word, because he reached out and took Raph’s hand. They shook quickly, Casey letting go before Raph, who turned back to sit down again.

“You uh…you okay?” Casey asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Raph said. “I kinda woke up on the wrong side of the bed, and I dunno, guess I’ve been kinda keyed up or something. I got in your face. I deserved it. I seriously am sorry, dude.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Casey said, taking a seat on the bench a few feet away from Raph. “I was real fucking nervous, okay? First day in a new school, transferring my Senior year, Tim’s the only person I know here and he sits me down at a table with one of the most famous people in the whole fucking city. I was just trying not to make an ass of myself, but I guess I did that anyway.”

Raph let out a weak chuckle as Casey took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. He sighed before putting it back on.

“It didn’t *seem* like you had a problem talking about him, but everyone flipped out on me after, so I felt like I oughta apologize. But uh, I guess that was the wrong move.”

“Yeah, should’ve trusted your gut on that one,” Raph said.

“I usually do,” Casey said. “And right now it’s tellin’ me you’re just havin’ a bad day.”

“Yeah…I am,” Raph said, surprised by his own honesty. “I’m normally like, way better about keeping a lid on shit these days.”

“So why’d it pop off so easy today if it wasn’t me talking about your brother?” Casey said with a laugh and his head cocked sideways, but the question felt genuine. Raph felt compelled to answer.

“Just…some fucking asshole yesterday. Got in my face on the train home. Kinda hard to tell someone to fuck off when Twitter would just eat that shit up. Gotta stay a *good little hero*, y’know? Guess I’m still pissed about it. Sorry I took it out on you.”

“S’alright,” Casey shrugged. “I get it. Feels good to fight back, even when it’s against the wrong person. I mean, that’s why I love hockey so much. Not a lot of sports where you get to regularly beat the shit outta people.”

That felt like a confession of some sort, but Raph wasn’t sure that Casey really knew what he’d said. He still looked like he was trying to figure Raph out. Raph decided not to point it out, instead playing along with Casey’s flippant attitude.

“Football?”

“I look like the football type to you?”

“*Hell* no.”

“Good,” Casey smirked. “Wouldn’t want Mr. Fancy Famous thinkin’—”

“Whoa whoa whoa,” Raph interrupted, “Maybe I’m famous, but *fancy?* You know I live in a fucking sewer, right? And look who’s talking; isn’t Brooklyn gentrified as *shit* now?”

“Yeah, not *my* part a’ Brooklyn.”

“Pfft, bet your parents are hipsters.”

“I shoulda slugged you *harder*,” Casey said with a playful-yet-maniacal look in his eye as he laughed. It made Raph laugh, too. God, he actually fucking *liked* this lunatic.

Casey made a show of dramatically scooting back a few more feet on the bench and holding his arms out, one finger raised in question.

“Ok, but for real though, you’re not mad I asked about your brother? Cuz I’ll cut that shit out if you want me to. But like I said, you seemed cool about it at lunch.”

“Dude, you’re the first person to talk to me about Leo outside of my family for fucking years,” Raph said, leaving Dr. Hart out of the statement. “Everyone acts like they should pretend he never existed around me, and it drives me fucking *insane*.”

“Well, you’re obviously crazy enough as it is, so I won’t make it any worse,” Casey said, nodding as if he’d said something profound. “Alright, I’m markin’ ‘Leonardo’ down as an okay topic of conversation, but not your *clearly* privileged lifestyle of the rich and famous—”

Raph balled up his spare shirt and threw it at Casey, who caught it with a laugh. He twirled it up as if about to whip it at Raph for some standard locker room shenanigans before he stopped and grimaced.

“Uh, you might actually wanna put this one on,” Casey said, pointing down at the shirt Raph was currently wearing. Blood was splattered on the front of it.

“Ugh,” Raph groaned. He reached for the bottom of his shirt and pulled it off over his head. Seeing as it was already stained, he wadded it up and used it to mop up his face. He caught his spare shirt as Casey tossed it back to him, but froze when he saw Casey’s eyes on his chest. He hadn’t even *thought* about turning to keep it out of sight before it was too late.

Casey laughed.

Raph was sure that was the first time he had ever gotten *that* reaction. He cocked an eyebrow at Casey, who lifted the hem of his own shirt to reveal a misshapen mass of scar tissue under his right pectoral.

“Twins again,” Casey laughed with a lopsided grin.

“I’m guessing *that* wasn’t from hockey,” Raph said after a brief, stunned moment.

“Yeah, it wasn’t,” Casey said, letting his shirt fall without elaborating. “I’m good, though. Can’t let ‘em slow us down, right?”

“Yeah,” Raph answered, somewhat distantly. Was this guy for real? Nobody had *ever* said something like that to Raph. Not when they were so convinced that the scar meant Raph was *stuck*.

Maybe he doesn’t know, Raph thought. Fuck. Someone had clearly told Casey that Raph had a *thing* about Leo, but maybe they didn’t tell him exactly *what* it was.

“So…I’m guessing it was Tim who told you to shut up about Leo? Was that him texting you at lunch?”

“Whoa dude, I’ve known Tim a lot longer than I’ve known you. You think I’m just gonna throw him under the bus?”

“…I guess not.”

“Well you guessed wrong,” Casey said. “Cuz I ain't a huge fan of people talking shit behind people’s backs. Or shells.”

Raph hadn’t expected that. He decided to press his luck.

“So…what else did he tell you?”

“That you actually believe your brother’s still alive somehow.”

“It’s not talking shit if it’s true,” Raph grunted.

“Well, he didn’t say it that nicely,” Casey huffed. “He said you were too messed up over getting shot and your brother dying to ever accept it, and that everyone thinks you’re kinda crazy. Still cool and shit, but crazy.”

“Yeah, I know,” Raph said, as if it didn’t still hurt to hear it said so plainly. Raph finished wiping the blood off his face and neck, then used his water bottle to wet his dirtied shirt. He stood and walked over to where he’d spat on the floor to clean it up, Casey watching him quietly all the while.

“So,” Casey said, finally breaking the silence. “You really think Leo’s alive?”

“Yeah, I fucking do,” Raph said, sitting down and throwing his bloody shirt into his bag a little too forcefully. He didn’t look at Casey.

“Okay.”

It took Raph a moment to process what Casey had just said, and even then, he still wasn’t sure he’d heard right. He looked down the bench at Casey, who looked unbothered.

“…Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Casey said again. He stood up and came to lean on the lockers in front of Raph. “Let’s make a deal. I believe you about Leo, I talk to you about Leo like he ain’t dead, *and* I don’t talk shit about you behind your back.”

“And what do you get?” Raph asked, still trying to come to terms with what Casey had just offered.

“*You* don’t go telling the school I fed their favorite little hero a knuckle sandwich. Or anyone else. I can’t afford to get tossed out, man. My mom’ll skin me alive, and I’ll lose any hope of a hockey scholarship. So, deal?”

Raph stood and stuck his hand out for the second time that evening. It felt too good to be true, but Raph had a good feeling about this guy that he just couldn't explain. He couldn't explain his feelings about Leo, either, so Raph took it as a sign as he gripped Casey's hand. Besides, he'd been pretty short on good feelings the past few years. He'd take what he could get at this point, *even if* that good feeling came in the form of a trigger-happy hockey nutcase.

Oh well. At least they'd be crazy together.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Been dying to introduce Casey forever now!

Seriously, thank you so much for your comments. I've been crazy sick and work its nuts right now. All of your comments are sustaining me!

Several people have asked, but the guy on the train was just a random New Yorker. I'm a sucker for just average, every day New Yorkers stepping up to help the heroes like in Spider-Man movies and Mutant Mayhem. I think the people of New York really would love the turtles, and would feel inspired by them to be heroes themselves in whatever way they can be.

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Art by @EllieSkellyArts Twitter

Chapter 9: Merry Fuckin' Christmas, Turtle Bro!

Chapter Notes

Content Warning:

panic attack, vomiting (non-graphic)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Casey:

[Merry Christmas you filthy animal]

Raph laughed at the gif from Home Alone in a text from Casey.

It was early Christmas morning, and Raph was in bed. Much like Raph, Casey was an early-to-bed, early-to-rise kind of guy, so the early morning text was little surprise. While Raph usually appreciated his rock-solid circadian rhythm, today he was wishing his body knew it was a holiday and that he was allowed to sleep in. It was barely dawn, and it would still be hours before everyone was up for any Christmas activities.

For now, Raph enjoyed the coziness of his bed and allowed himself to skip his usual morning workout. No need to wear himself out before what was sure to be a long day. Unlike Thanksgiving, his family was *very* into celebrating Christmas. Leo and Mikey were especially prone to the Christmas spirit. It wasn't that Raph and Donnie didn't like Christmas, because they did. But Leo and Mikey? They *loved* Christmas.

They were both usually the ring leaders for the family traditions. The lead up to the first Christmas without Leo had been subdued, the loss just a month earlier still fresh and raw. His absence had been felt painfully by everyone in the Lair not only that first Christmas, but the following as well. Raph and Splinter's fight on the first anniversary had dashed any hopes that their second Leo-less Christmas might be better than the first. With tensions so high in the Lair, Mikey had skipped out on his usual demands to watch his Christmas movies or to put up decorations that year as well.

However, *this* year's holiday season had almost felt normal again. As much as Raph had come to love their movie nights, he didn't think he could stomach another Christmas flick at this point. Mikey had even insisted they go ice skating, something they'd never done. They'd booked a time slot for later that evening at a rink in the park.

The others didn't know, but Raph had secretly asked Casey for a skating lesson a few days prior. The mutants were all extremely athletic, and usually Raph felt confident with any sort of new physical pursuit. For some reason, though, Raph couldn't shake his nerves about making an ass of himself on the ice.

Casey had given Raph plenty of shit for it, but had agreed nonetheless. His teasing had been good natured and ceased the moment they made it onto the ice of the rink where Casey's team practiced. Casey wasn't the most…*eloquent* of Raph's friends, but between Casey's passion for skating and Raph's natural abilities, it had taken less than an hour on the ice with Casey's enthusiastic coaching to quash Raph's nerves.

"Dunno why you were so worried about it, bro. You picked that up quick as fuck," Casey had said when they finally left the rink and unlaced their skates.

"I really don't know," Raph had told him truthfully. *"We found some old roller blades as kids and all took turns with them, and Leo was the only one of us who fucking ate it when he tried. You should've seen the black eye he gave himself, dude."*

Casey had laughed pretty hard at that, and Raph smiled at the memory.

After Casey had punched Raph and they'd made their pact, the two started hanging out the very next day. Casey had stuck to his word and acted as if Leo was still alive. He wasn't afraid to laugh or give Leo grief when Raph told a funny story about his brother, and Raph relished it. He hadn't been kidding when he told Casey that nobody talked to him about Leo. Even his brothers barely spoke about him, and when they did, it was *never* to laugh at his expense.

It wasn't that Raph loved making fun of Leo. However, with everyone not wanting to speak ill of the "dead", being able to laugh about his brother with someone was something Raph hadn't had for years. The city had quite literally put Leo on a pedestal, and his heroic act seemed to have erased everyone's memory of all the other things that had made Leo who he was. Raph hadn't fully appreciated how much he missed talking about Leo like the real, authentic, and sometimes flawed person he was. Besides Dr. Hart, Casey was the first person Raph had been able to talk to about Leo the *brother* instead of Leo the *hero*.

Before Casey, Raph thought he knew what having a best friend was like, but he was quickly realizing how mistaken he had been. Tim and the other guys were good friends, but Casey? It still kind of scared Raph how much he and Casey just *got* each other. Raph could still hardly believe how fast things had moved with him. The fact that they'd only known each other for about two weeks and Raph was *already* thinking Casey might be his best friend was both alarming and exhilarating. Raph felt like this wasn't normal, but really, was *anything* about Raph's life normal?

Starting a friendship with a fight wasn't normal, either, but it somehow felt fitting. It wasn't just Casey's attitude that was rough; he was physical with Raph in a way nobody but his brothers had ever been. Casey didn't seem intimidated by Raph's size, strength, or shell. Even Tim, who Raph had spent literal years wrestling with, rarely did more than give Raph the occasional gentle elbow in the side when joking around.

Casey, on the other hand, seemed to think shoving people around was a love language. The first time Casey shoulder checked Raph in the hallway as they passed going opposite directions between classes, Raph had been a little startled. It wasn't until Casey laughed and shouted back at him *"see you after practice?"* with a giant smile that Raph understood; *this* was how Casey showed affection.

Raph fucking loved it. Everyone in his life treated him like he was simultaneously as fragile as glass and as dangerous as a grenade. Donnie and Mikey had finally started being less cautious around Raph, but there was still some hesitancy in the way they spoke to him. Raph was happy that they spoke to him at all now, but it was still frustrating that there was a level of gentleness they'd never used with him before. Casey was *anything* but gentle.

Raph:

Think your parents finally got you a brain for Xmas this year?

Raph shot the text off after debating with himself for a few moments. He had considered texting Casey something to express how much he appreciated waking up to something that lightened his mood, but then he'd have to explain *why* his mood needed lightening in the first place.

It had been a while since Raph's last nightmare about Leo, so he wasn't sure why he was so surprised to have had one last night. They had started just a couple weeks after Leo's disappearance, then became devastatingly frequent for a time. They had tapered off a few months ago now, becoming fewer and far between, but that didn't make them any less terrible when they did happen.

His nightmares usually consisted of Leo in a disturbing or frightening scenario, more often than not involving some sinister type of machinery reminiscent of TCRI's milker. Dr. Hart had gently explained to Raph how his subconscious could very easily conflate both the trauma of being milked and losing Leo, giving rise to nightmares that combined both elements. Raph didn't think that really explained why the machines never looked exactly like the one that had been used on him, or why it was always just Leo. All four of them had been stuck in that machine thinking they would die there, not *just* Leo.

Sometimes the nightmares had Leo fighting some faceless figure, or seemingly a whole hoard of them. These dreams would always start out like Leo was going to win. Leo was an excellent swordsman and martial artist after all, and he appeared to be even better in these nightmares. But he would inevitably become exhausted and falter, and Raph usually woke in a panic every time Leo's shell hit the floor in defeat.

Last night had been unusual, though. They had been in a dark room, and Raph had sat next to Leo as he cried. Raph was pretty sure he'd asked Leo something at one point, though he couldn't recall exactly what the question had been. Whatever it was, it had only made Leo cry harder. That was all Raph could remember, much to his frustration.

Raph wasn't even sure if he could call it a nightmare. It hadn't been enjoyable by any means, but it leaving him frustrated and uneasy was a far cry from the usual cold sweats or racing heart he typically woke up with. It *was* Christmas; maybe the universe was finally throwing him a fucking bone by serving up a Nightmare Lite for once, rather than the standard Night Terror Supreme with extra anxiety and a side order of heart palpitations.

Raph's phone buzzed, and he looked at it to see that Casey had responded.

Casey:

Don't need a brain when you're this handsome and talented

Raph:

Keep telling yourself that buddy

Casey:

and it's just my mom btw

Raph:

Ahhh fuck, I'm sorry dude

Casey:

Oh don't be. He's not dead.

World would be a better place if he was tho lol

Raph:

yikes

That fucking sucks. I'm sorry dude

Casey:

Thanks man

But yeah I'd rather have a rat for a dad lol

Raph:

I think he'd rather have you for a son too tbh

Casey:

No fuckin way

DO NOT shatter my illusions about Rat Dad!

Raph couldn't decide if he should laugh or groan. Of *course* Casey would be a fan of the Rat Dad meme.

In the beginning, it had been funny how much the city of New York had seemingly adopted Splinter as some sort of unofficial dad mascot. Someone had snapped a photo of Splinter in the aftermath of Superfly's attack, capturing a moment where he'd been looking at his sons with unmistakable pride. The internet had absolutely eaten it up.

The "New York's Rat Dad" meme the photo morphed into had gone viral at the speed of light. It became a popular reaction image, mostly to convey someone being proud of someone else. Raph had liked it at first, but now he didn't know how to feel about it. Aside from the brief moment when Raph had unintentionally cried at this year's remembrance service, it had been a *long* time since his dad had looked at him like that.

Casey:

But for real tho wtf does that mean?

Raph:

We don't really get along anymore

Casey:

Oh fuck

I'm sorry bro. we don't gotta get into if you don't wanna

But I'm also down to listen

I mean I'm no stranger to dad bullshit

Raph smiled. Casey was such a wildcard. For someone who looked and sounded so rough around the edges, Casey possessed a shocking amount of empathy and emotional bandwidth. He was abnormally receptive when conversations veered into deeper territory. Since their friendship began, Casey had not even once tried to deflect or steer them back to more trivial topics when things got heavy. There was just this inexplicable and raw authenticity to Casey that Raph had never really encountered in someone his own age before.

Sometimes, Raph felt like he was somehow taking advantage of Casey when he got like this. Dr. Hart was literally being paid to listen to all Raph's problems, and here he was dumping things on Casey anyway. He couldn't *help* himself, though. It just felt right. *Casey* felt right.

Raph:

We really got into it a couple times over Leo

I said some pretty messed up stuff to him on Thanksgiving last year

Then I was in Leo's room when he came home after the service and he absolutely flipped the fuck out

That was kinda the last straw for him I guess

Casey:

Oh fuck dude

Why were you in there?

Raph:

I don't know

Sometimes I feel like the answer is in there or something

Fuck fuck fuck, *why* was he telling Casey this? Casey might have been weirdly open about stuff, but this was going too far. Raph sounded just as crazy as everyone else thought he was. When Splinter had told him to stay and left him there in the Lair, Raph hadn't made a conscious decision to go to Leo's room. It certainly hadn't been Raph's choice to sit on the floor beside Leo's bed and cry for what felt like an eternity. It had just happened, and Raph had no reasonable way to explain any of it.

He *had* stopped crying by the time Splinter and the others came home, but Raph wished he'd had his shit together enough to get up and leave the room before he had been found there. He still remembered the look on his dad's face; shock morphing into pain, then pain becoming *rage.*

Splinter may have left earlier that evening with a quiet command for Raph to stay behind, but his shouted demands for Raph to leave Leo's room had been so loud that Raph was *sure* people on the surface above could have heard. As Raph had stumbled out, shaken by the realization that he was actually *scared* of his dad in that moment, Splinter told him to stay out of Leo's room. He hadn't specified for how long, so Raph assumed his dad had meant *for fucking ever*.

And yet, Raph still could not help but feel some sort of unexplainable pull toward Leo's room. *Something* was in there. The rational part of his brain knew there was nothing in there but boxes of Leo's things, each one having been carefully organized and labeled by Splinter over a year ago now. He hadn't seen the boxes for himself, but he'd overheard Donnie telling Mikey about why he was fixing a jammed label maker for Splinter.

Even knowing the room contained nothing but a collection of boxes, the gravity of Leo's room was nearly irresistible for Raph. When the Lair had been renovated, the old and tattered tapestry at the entrance of the room had been upgraded to a circular sheet of drywall with real a door. Raph had dared to test the handle a couple times while home alone, but found it locked on every attempt.

He could break in easily, but Raph was sure that his father would somehow know. He would have no satisfactory answer for why he needed in so badly, just as he now had no answer for Casey. He felt the heat rise in his face rereading his last text, kicking himself for being so needlessly honest.

Raph:

I guess that's dumb

Sorry to get all corny on you at the ass crack of dawn

Casey:

Don't be sorry man

I asked

And I don't think it's dumb

Raph wondered how true that was, or if this was just part of Casey holding up his end of their deal. He wanted to believe Casey really meant it. He'd given Raph little reason to doubt his sincerity, but Raph also found it a little hard to believe that Casey could so effortlessly cast aside what he had thought was true before their agreement. However, Raph decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Whether or not it was entirely genuine, Raph valued Casey being on his side too much to question it too deeply.

Raph:

Thanks dude

So what do you actually think your mom got you?

Casey:

I already know lol. She got me some new hockey gear and forgot to hide it

I acted like I didn't see it tho

Raph:

man, can I get some "how to be a good son and not a total disappointment" lessons?

Casey:

I am NOT the right guy to be teaching that

Besides, you still owe me for the skating lesson bro!

But you can pay me back with some lessons in ass kicking

Casey sent a series of Kung Fu Panda gifs and Raph laughed.

Raph:

Kinda seems like you got that covered

You got me pretty good dude

Casey:

That's just growing up in the shit part of town

And hockey lol

I don't got any like formal training or whatever you guys call it

Raph:

I mean, we didn't have anything formal either

We learned from our dad

And he learned from the internet and old tapes

Casey:

No fuckin way bro. I'd heard that but I always thought it was some kinda joke or something

Are you for real?

Raph:

Yeah lol

I mean maybe we don't see eye to eye anymore but I always thought he was such a fucking badass growing up

I dunno how you teach yourself all that AND four little kids

Fuck, he was getting too emotional again. That stupid nightmare really did a number on him, didn't it? He needed to reign this shit in.

Raph:

But for real I'm down if you wanna like go over some shit

I don't really have anyone to practice with anymore anyway

My brothers can still fight, but since we started going to school they don't really train or practice anymore

Casey:

That would be fucking rad dude

Why aren't your bros into it anymore? That shit is sick as fuck

Raph:

I mean the whole ninja thing was to keep us from being discovered, and to protect ourselves if we ever were

Not super important anymore I guess

But I still like doing it

Casey:

I getcha dude

I'd never give up hockey, even if I never end up going pro

I couldn't fucking wait to get back out on the ice after surgery

Casey still hadn't told Raph what had left him with such gruesome scars on his ribcage, but Raph hadn't tried to pry. Not so far, anyway. As rapidly as their friendship had developed, Raph didn't think he had earned the right to ask about it just yet. The one or two times it had come up, Casey had just mentioned it in passing before casually moving on.

Raph:

Totally. Having to sit still with my arm in a sling was fucking torture

Casey:

Preach dude

They texted back and forth for a while longer, Casey sending Raph a couple more pointers on skating for later that evening. Raph had never had an interest in ice skating or hockey, but Casey's enthusiasm

for the sport was infectious. Raph had already agreed to come watch his next game, and Casey had taken *much* delight in giving Raph a crash course in the rules.

The game wouldn't be for a few more days. Raph tried to keep it in mind as something to look forward to, because he really didn't know how to feel about today. Raph had already committed to participating in whatever holiday shenanigans Mikey wanted, but he knew it would mean spending almost the entire day in the presence of their dad.

Raph thought about what Dr. Hart had said about the possibility of Splinter "extending an olive branch", and he still wasn't sure how to react if it happened. Raph couldn't think of a single scenario in which some sort of truce would come without some strings attached.

But Raph couldn't deny that life had become slightly more bearable in the Lair since Splinter had become less withdrawn around him. It still freaked Raph out when his dad spoke to him for longer than was strictly necessary. For more than a year now, their interactions had been nothing more than terse exchanges of information; when Raph would be home from practice, where Splinter and Scumbug were going and for how long, what they needed from the store…

Now, though, Splinter was asking Raph things like what he wanted for dinner, or how coaching at practice had been going. *That* had definitely taken Raph by surprise. He wondered who had told Splinter that he'd stopped competing and started coaching, because *he* hadn't.

Raph thought he should appreciate the fact that his dad was still interested in his life enough to ask other people about him, even when he hadn't been asking Raph directly. Instead, it made Raph feel uncertain. His dad was actively keeping tabs on what he was up to in his daily life. He didn't understand why the revelation bothered him so much, given he had a GPS tracker in his shell. Splinter could see where Raph was at any moment if he wanted.

Raph supposed his apprehension came from the fact that his physical location was a very different thing than how he was doing. For so long now, Raph was sure that the only thing Splinter cared about when it came to Raph was if he believed Leo was dead or not. Did this mean that maybe Splinter *actually* gave a shit about Raph's life beyond his "delusion"? Dr. Hart had been saying as much for a long time, but Raph hadn't really ever believed her.

Raph supposed it was possible. But with how things had been for so long, after everything Raph had said and done, it just didn't feel *probable*.

As Raph got up, he tried to put it all out of his mind. He'd killed enough time texting with Casey and scrolling his social medias in bed that Mikey might be up now. Raph was the earliest riser in the Lair, but Mikey was a close second. They'd started eating breakfast together most days, and Raph enjoyed the way they both got to gang up on a bleary-eyed Donnie whenever he eventually joined them. No matter how much Splinter had lectured him for it, Donnie usually stayed up way too late on the internet or playing video games.

Which was why Raph was more than a little surprised to see both Mikey *and* Donnie in the main room as he entered. Raph laughed when Donnie looked at him with the world's most bloodshot eyes.

"Whoa, someone's excited for Christmas," Raph laughed.

"Guh," Donnie grunted, reaching for a mug on the shelf and nearly missing the handle. Raph moved closer to Mikey, who was looking at Donnie with an odd mix of amusement and guilt.

"Did you wake him up?" Raph asked. Mikey excitedly shaking everyone awake on Christmas morning had been a longstanding tradition in the family, one which had abruptly ended two Christmases ago. Mikey had been so in the Christmas spirit this year, though, that perhaps he had decided it was time to revive his customary early morning wakeup call.

"Uh…no?" Mikey chuckled nervously. "Donnie—"

"Don't," Donnie cut him off. "Shhh…"

Raph and Mikey watched in bemusement as their brother shuffled to the table. He had made himself some coffee, and Raph was impressed that none sloshed out of Donnie's mug during the unsteady journey from kitchen counter to dining table.

"Nobody talk to me until," Donnie said, bringing his wrist up to his face to read his smartwatch, which wasn't there. He squinted at his bare wrist in annoyance. "Ugh, whatever. *Later*."

"Oh my god, are you gonna make it dude?" Raph laughed as Donnie rested his forehead on the table. Donnie groaned into the wood.

“I know what’ll make you feel better,” Mikey said deviously. “Ugly Christmas sweaters!”

Both Donnie *and* Raph groaned at that. Mikey cackled and scurried off back toward his room, presumably to get the sweaters. Raph took the opportunity to sit down beside Donnie, who made some unintelligible noises of acknowledgement.

“You’re not like, sick or something are you?”

“No,” he said, slowly raising his head to look into his mug. “Just slept like crap.”

Raph couldn’t put his finger on it. Maybe it was in the way he said it, or maybe it was his posture, but something about Donnie seemed off. Raph remembered the last time Donnie had a rough morning. “*Do you ever have dreams about him?”* Had Donnie *also* had a nightmare about Leo last night?

“Did you uh…have a bad dream?”

“Yeah,” Donnie groaned, finally sitting up.

“Was it, um,” Raph struggled to find the words. “Was it…as upsetting as last time?”

Raph watched as the comprehension of what he was asking finally sunk in. Donnie’s fingers twitched around his mug, and he looked a little embarrassed as he answered.

“Oh, no…it wasn’t, y’know, anything like *that*. And it wasn’t even really *bad*, just weird.”

“Weird how?”

“Mikey was in it,” Donnie grumbled. “And if you think IRL Mikey is annoying, wait til you meet *dream* Mikey.”

Raph laughed. Thank fuck. He hated the thought of his brothers ever enduring the same sort of nightmares about Leo that he had, even last night's strange nightmare-but-not.

The real Mikey returned with two bundled up sweaters and a giant grin. He tossed one to each brother, and Raph unwadded his red one to see *THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR* written across the front. The famous WWE wrestler's face painted mask was printed on the sweater, along with some snowflakes and Christmas trees. Raph looked over to see Donnie's purple sweater. It was Kingdom Hearts themed, a giant purple heart in the center bordered by keyblades, heartless, and reindeer.

"Okay, these are great," Donnie admitted with a smile. He pulled his on over his t-shirt. When Raph did the same, he thought Mikey might explode in delight.

"You guys like 'em?!"

"Yeah, where did you even find these?" Raph asked.

"The internet! Man, Christmas has really leveled up since we can shop online now," Mikey mused.

Donnie chuckled in agreement, now looking a little less groggy, though still not fully awake. They sat together as they waited for the others to join them, Mikey chattering away excitedly about the day ahead and Donnie nursing his coffee. Sitting there with his brothers, Raph smiled as he basked in his contentment.

It was just felt so fucking *great* to be on good terms with his brothers again. So much had changed in what felt like so little time. Raph knew he'd been drowning in his own loneliness for a long time now, but it wasn't until he had breached the surface that he truly understood how deep he had sunk. But here he was, his head finally above water, and Raph took in every glorious breath of air he shared with them.

The renewed bond with his brothers left Raph feeling so happy and relaxed, in fact, that his good mood hardly even faltered when Splinter entered the room. He even cracked a smile at the Doritos themed ugly sweater he was wearing. Mikey must have given it to him earlier.

The rest of the mutants poured in over the next hour or so, and before long, a proper Christmas breakfast was underway. Soon, the odd assortment of mutants was packed into the kitchen, haphazardly maneuvering around each other as they cooked bacon, eggs, waffles, pancakes, cinnamon

rolls, French toast and more. Even a few breakfast casseroles and a quiche had been prepared ahead of time to be thrown in the oven.

The actual eating of breakfast was so long and drawn out that it eventually morphed into brunch, but Raph wasn't complaining. The Lair was filled with an excited energy. It was crowded, but in a cozy and comfortable way. Raph felt like he was in one of the dozens of Christmas movies Mikey had made him watch.

Eventually, Mikey could no longer contain himself and cajoled everyone into the main seating area to begin opening gifts. The whole affair was just as chaotic and disorganized as breakfast. Raph could hardly keep track of who had given what to who, only occasionally catching someone yelling "thanks Raph!" in his direction as they opened a gift from him.

Raph had a decent pile of gifts himself, and he took a break from unwrapping to go grab a glass of water. He carefully weaved his way through the mess of wrappings and tissue paper littering the floor and had to squeeze past Leatherhead and Ray Filet to the relative calm of the kitchen. Now that he was no longer in the thick of the Christmas morning madness, Raph felt an odd sensation wash over him.

It took a few moments to recognize that what he was feeling was *longing*. This morning had been the least lonely Raph had felt in years. Nevertheless, an unmistakable ache of loneliness had settled solidly in his chest, and with it an overwhelming longing to return to where everyone else was. He had only been removed from the festivities for a few moments now, and he was still just feet away from his extended family. It scared Raph how quickly he had slipped back into this devastating feeling of isolation.

Before Raph could make his way back into the mob of mutants, he realized that Splinter was carefully treading through the packed living room toward him. Their eyes met, and there was no way Raph could pretend he hadn't realized Splinter was coming to meet him in the kitchen. Raph turned to refill his glass, giving himself a quick opportunity to take a few deep breaths.

"Merry Christmas, Raphael," Splinter said softly once he had broken through the perimeter of the group to join Raph in the kitchen. He had a wrapped gift in his hand, which he held out for Raph to take.

Raph took it, and it felt suspiciously like a book. He was unsurprised to find just that under the wrapping paper, but was surprised that the book was clearly well-used. It was a hardback, the dust jacket missing, the edges of the pale red cover dented and frayed. It looked familiar somehow, but Raph couldn't place it. He turned it on its side to read the title along the spine.

The Art and Science of Meditation

Raph looked at Splinter, whose eyes were glossy.

"That was your brother's," he said gently. "I got it for him when he first became interested in the, ah…*metaphysical* nature of martial arts. Sorry that it's not something fancy and new, but it wasn't new when I gave it to him, either."

Raph knew what his father meant. It wasn't until they'd entered the human world that they'd really ever had "new" things. Most of their gifts for each other growing up had been scavenged. Splinter had probably stolen it from a second-hand bookshop when he'd first given it to Leo.

Raph opened the book to lay it open on one hand. Its spine long-since broken in, he had to cradle it carefully to keep it from flopping out of his grip and onto the floor. He couldn't stop the lump in his throat from forming when he saw notes scribbled in the margins. They were in Leo's handwriting.

Raph gently flipped through it to find that Leo had annotated nearly every page. Certain sentences were circled or underlined, sometimes even highlighted. He remembered why it looked familiar now; Leo had spent *hours* poring over this ratty old thing, often using his phone for light to read as they all lay in their beds. Sometimes he'd leave the Lair with it alone, wanting to find somewhere a little quieter in the sewer or out on a rooftop to read. Raph and the others hadn't ever really made it easy for Leo to concentrate.

Raph had thought 'metaphysical' was an oddly sophisticated word for his father to use. The ooze had made all of them extremely intelligent, but unlike Raph and his brothers, Splinter had no formal education. However, Raph spotted the word in question underlined a couple times as he looked through the book. Leo must have discussed its contents with Splinter at some point.

"Your, ah…Dr. Hart. She says you like the breathing exercises she teach you. Is very similar to meditating, I think. Maybe you will like to try this. And even if you don't want to, you can still have something of Leo's. A piece of him to keep with you."

Raph understood now. *This* was the olive branch.

He remained silent, waiting for whatever conditions Splinter would attach to this extremely Leo-centric gift. Splinter said nothing, though, and he wondered if Dr. Hart had taught him this little trick. Raph could *not* stand the awkward silence, so he was forced to speak.

"Uh, thanks…dad," Raph said, hating how he faltered and tripped over his own words whenever he spoke to Splinter. Nobody made Raph such a sputtering, tongued-tied mess like his dad. "I uh…I really appreciate it. I know how um…important his…stuff is to you."

"*You* are important to me, Raphael," Splinter said. Raph couldn't look at him. He kept his eyes on some words Leo had written at the bottom of a page without really reading them. "I should not have *ever* made you feel like a bunch of old things mattered to me more than any of my sons."

He couldn't give into the painful silence that stretched between them, because he genuinely could not think of anything to say to that. He somehow found the courage to tear his eyes away from the book long enough to look Splinter in the eye.

Raph's heart leapt at the expression on his father's face. It was so much more, so much *better* than the stupid Rat Dad meme could ever be, because right here in this moment, it was directed at Raph and Raph alone. Splinter hadn't said it out loud, but he hadn't needed to. Raph could see it in Splinter's face, in his eyes, in his very *soul*. Despite Raph's past rage and obstinance, despite all the poison that had poured freely from his mouth, despite the *many* valid reasons Raph had given him not to, his father *still* loved him.

Raph looked away. It was too much. He had doubted it for so long, been so sure that their relationship was unsalvageable. This was the first time that Raph actually believed the two of them could possibly achieve some sort of equilibrium. Splinter still hadn't laid out anything he wanted from Raph in exchange for Leo's book. Maybe his father's love really *was* unconditional.

But the incredible swell of joy Raph felt was suddenly interrupted as he remembered a crucial fact: this shift in Splinter's behavior toward Raph had been initiated by a *mistake*. Raph hadn't meant to cry at the remembrance service. He *still* couldn't explain why it had happened. Maybe Splinter really never had stopped loving him, but if seeing Raph cry was what made Splinter choose to show Raph that, then Raph hadn't truly earned the right to know it. He deserved to still believe Splinter hated him. He deserved for Splinter to *actually* hate him.

He wished Splinter hadn't given him Leo's book. It now felt heavy in his hand. He should give it back, refuse to accept it, but he couldn't. He wanted to hold it like Leo had. Study it like Leo had. *Treasure* it like Leo had. Raph gripped it harder as he made his selfish choice to keep it.

“I’m gonna…go put this in my room,” Raph said, and Splinter smiled as he nodded.

Raph thought that perhaps he had worked himself up into the start of a panic attack, but he felt everything begin to deescalate as he got closer to his room. He didn’t even shut his door after entering, instead making a beeline for his nightstand. He opened the drawer and put Leo’s book inside. Satisfied that it was now safe and secure, Raph turned to return to the living room. Instead, he found a worried looking Donnie in his doorway.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “I saw dad corner you, and then you left, so…”

“Yeah Donnie, I’m good,” Raph said with a soft smile. If this had been the old Raph, he would have snapped and told Donnie he was fine and to leave him alone. He still felt a small pang of embarrassment that his little brother felt he had to come check on him after speaking with Splinter, but Raph’s appreciation far outweighed his shame.

“Okay, good, good…yeah,” Donnie said awkwardly, fidgeting with the hem of his silly sweater.

“Thanks for checking in, dude,” Raph told him. “You and Mike, I really appreciate you guys, y’know, looking out for me and shit lately.”

“It’s not like, I dunno…too weird?”

“It’s always gonna be a little awkward,” Raph admitted. “But it does seriously mean a lot to me. It’s nice having some backup again.”

Donnie seemed to almost flinch at that, which had not been Raph’s intent. He looked at Donnie questioningly, and his brother’s fidgeting fingers gripped his sweater a little tighter.

“I can’t believe how shitty we were—how shitty *I* was—for so freaking long. I dunno how you can like, be so cool about it now. We just…left you hanging.”

“I mean, I definitely wasn’t making it easy for you to be around me. I wasn’t really being a good brother, either,” Raph sighed. “Look, I know we’re all gonna feel real stupid and shitty about all this for a while… And I know I already told you we’re cool, but I’ll keep reminding you of that if I have

to. Fuck knows how many times Dr. Hart had to repeat shit for me to finally get it…It's just gonna take some time, y'know?"

Donnie sighed and nodded. He seemed to be waiting for Raph to continue, and Raph once again felt the intimidating realization hit him that *he* was the big brother now. Donnie may have come here to check on Raph, but he was still looking for some reassurance from his big brother.

"We never really got to figure out how we all work without…without Leo around. I just, y'know, cut myself outta the picture. I'm sure we're gonna mess up sometimes, but I'm glad we're finally figuring it out now."

"Yeah," Donnie said with a pitiful little smile. "Me too."

They returned to the living room together, and the lightness Raph had felt earlier that morning returned. He spent the rest of the day there with extended family, enjoying their company and gifts. As a gift for the whole family, Donnie and Wingnut had rigged up a VR headset that had modified attachments for everyone. Whether it was Rocksteady's oddly shaped head or Mondo's bulging eyes, the two techiest of mutants had made sure everyone could play something with it.

As each mutant gave it a go, Raph couldn't remember the last time he had laughed so hard. Genghis had reacted so violently to a zombie in his game that his tongue lashed out and brought the Christmas tree toppling over. Raph knew Ray could hit some pretty high notes, but the piercing shriek he had made when a shark attacked during his virtual deep sea dive could have shattered glass. Donnie annihilated all of them at Beat Saber using a staff modification, but Raph did surprisingly well himself in the regular dual-wielding format. He'd never been good with Leo's katanas the few times he'd tried them, much preferring the stabbing motion his sai allowed him, but somehow he'd cleared his levels with relatively high scores. Even Donnie seemed impressed.

After another wild and disorderly round in the kitchen, Christmas dinner was served. The three turtles ate quickly, needing to make sure they made it to their booked time slot at the ice-skating rink. They had invited the others when making the plans, but the other mutants had all insisted the brothers have a "boy's night". Raph had rolled his eyes at the phrase, but appreciated the chance to have a quieter evening with his brothers after such a long and hectic day.

The journey to the park was nice. It hadn't yet snowed, but the air was cold and crisp. Raph took in the lights and decorations with more interest than he thought he ever had before. Everything somehow felt more real, more vivid. Once they got to the rink, Raph could hardly lace his skates; not from nerves, but *excitement*.

As Raph glided around the ice with his brothers, who smiled and laughed through the whole endeavor, he thought his heart might explode. Raph was *happy.* This was *happiness.* Had he really forgotten what it was like to feel like this? To feel this good, this alive, this *loved.* He took in a deep breath of cold air, but felt warmer than he had in years.

Their time slot came to an end, and the brothers left the ice to return their skates. Mikey insisted on some hot chocolate from a little booth, and Raph didn't even try to protest. They sipped their drinks as they began the trip back towards the Lair.

They were half way home before tossing their empty cups in a trash can. Hands now free, Raph grabbed Mikey's shoulders and shook him playfully.

"This was a *great* idea, Mikey," he said, loving the way Mikey intentionally ragdolled to jokingly flop around in Raph's grip.

"Donnie's not the only genius in the family!" Mikey said when Raph let go, putting his arms on his hips and puffing out his chest.

"I'm gonna let that slide, but *only* because it's Christmas," Donnie deadpanned.

From across the street, a group of what looked like 20-somethings were walking in the opposite direction. From the unsteady and less-than-straight way they were walking, it seemed they'd been enjoying a different kind of Christmas drink. They spotted Raph and his brothers, and one shouted from across the street at them.

"Eeeeey! Turtle broooos! Do a flip!"

Whenever this sort of shit happened, Raph usually ignored it and kept walking. Mikey never had a problem hamming it up for people, though, and busted out a simple and effortless flip on the spot. The tipsy young adults cheered as Mikey bowed with a flourish.

"Mikey, Mikey, Mikey…You call *that* a flip?" Donnie admonished. He gathered some speed, launched himself up to do a short wall run before kicking off for a double backflip. The cheers intensified as Donnie landed with catlike grace.

“Oh my god,” Raph groaned.

“C’mon, Raph! They’re not being dicks about it, and it’s *fun!*” Mikey said defensively.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Raph said, letting a wicked grin spread across his face. “If you guys are gonna show off, then *show off.*”

Raph did a wall run like Donnie, but instead of pushing off for a flip, he aimed himself at the pole of a streetlight. Landing on the top, he ran down the length of the outstretched beam supporting the light, then launched himself from the fixture. His flip had him clear the width of the street below, landing just feet from the group who had egged them on. After a stunned moment, there was an eruption of whoops and *fuck yeahs* that made Raph burst out laughing.

“Merry fuckin’ Christmas, turtle bro!” one of them said, giving Raph an uncoordinated but enthusiastic high five. Raph laughed as he jogged back across the street to his incredulous brothers.

“*What’s* gotten into you, dude?!” Mikey said, hands on his head and gripping his beanie in shock. His eyes were wide, but he was grinning from ear to ear.

“Christmas spirit, I guess,” Raph laughed. Donnie threw his head back to laugh.

“Holy shit,” Donnie giggled. “And I didn’t think this day could get any better.”

When they were finally home and Raph climbed into bed, he couldn’t help but agree. It really had been the best day he’d had in forever. Before he fell asleep, he opened the drawer of his nightstand to look at Leo’s book. The only way today could have been any better is if they had needed to rent four pairs of skates instead of three. Raph closed the drawer, and as he drifted off to sleep, he wondered how much better Leo would be at Beat Saber than him. He couldn’t *wait* to find out.

The room was dark, just as it had been last night. Why was Raph here again so soon? The stretches between his visits in this room were typically weeks long. Raph loved any chance to see his brother, but he had *just* been here. It didn't feel right.

Raph could hardly see. He felt Leo's presence in the darkness. After a few moments, he could just barely make out that his brother was a few feet away from him.

"Leo," Raph prompted gently. Leo didn't move.

Raph needed to get his brother's attention. He found himself crouched before Leo, not really sure how he'd gotten there. He didn't remember walking over. It didn't matter though. Raph could finally see that Leo was sitting with his knees up and his arms wrapped around them. His head bowed so low it rested on his forearms. Raph was close enough now to reach out and touch Leo's arm.

His brother jerked violently the moment Raph's fingers made contact. Raph watched in anxious confusion as Leo clumsily scooted away from him. He didn't stop until he was huddled in the corner of the room. Leo pressed his forehead into the wall, his shell toward Raph, arms tucked tightly against his plastron.

"I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this," Leo whispered, frantic and wild.

"Leo?"

"*Please*," Leo rasped. He curled in on himself further.

This was wrong. All wrong. It hadn't been like this before. Their room was supposed to be good and safe. Leo should smile in their room, not cower in the corner.

"I'm here, Leo," Raph said gently. "What do you need?"

"Please, Raph! I can't, I can't do it. *Help me*. Please, Raph, *please!"* Leo begged, his voice cracking on the final 'please'.

Raph didn't understand how he knew what Leo wanted, but he was filled with absolute certainty. Leo wasn't asking for much. He could do this for him. Crossing his legs beneath him, Raph sat next to Leo and began to breathe.

It was strange, but also somehow not at all, to feel both his and Leo's lungs at the same time. It was easy to tell which was which. Raph's lungs were strong, effortless to fill. His diaphragm was a muscle he controlled with just as much ease as any other. This may as well have been morning warmups in the dojo. Raph was good at this. Controlling his body. Moving. Breathing. Existing.

Leo's lungs, though…They felt feeble. Deflated. His muscles were strained and taut. Every breath was a struggle. He felt Leo's panic as too little air made it past his lips. Leo was fighting, fighting everything, even Raph.

"Just let me," Raph said breathily on an exhale. *Let me do this for you*.

Raph's lips twitched, almost a smile, as he felt Leo finally hand over the reins.

Raph knew how to reel in this wild fervor. He'd done it a million times now. Dr. Hart had taught him well. It felt even easier now that it was Leo's breath he meant to control instead of his own. Leo was still there, still in his body, but he was now in the back seat while Raph took the wheel.

That didn't mean it wasn't still a challenge. It was difficult not to allow Leo's fear to distract and overwhelm him. Tremors wracked Leo's body as it strained for every molecule of oxygen Raph gave it, and Raph had to hold himself steady. He could do this, though. Leo wasn't Raph's little brother, but his protective instinct had roared to life the moment he had realized what Leo needed.

Raph felt proud when he realized his efforts were working. He felt proud of Leo, too. There was nothing more terrifying than this, drowning on dry land, suffocating from your own paralysis. But with Raph's help, Leo had made it through. Raph continued to coach Leo's lungs into a steadier rhythm until he felt it was safe to finally hand things back to Leo.

Raph felt a pang of loss as he severed the connection between them. He watched Leo physically shudder, but his breath only faltered for a moment as he regained control of himself. They sat there and breathed together for a few minutes before Leo glanced at Raph. He looked away quickly, then brought his hands up to cover his face.

“I’m so sorry,” Leo groaned into his palms. “I’m *so*, so sorry, Raph.”

“Stop,” Raph said forcefully. “You’re allowed to ask for help, Leo.”

“You were having such a good day, and I *ruined* it.”

“You didn’t ruin it. I’m glad you brought me here. Now I get to finish Christmas day with you.”

That got Leo to finally drop his hands and at look at Raph again. His smile was weak, but at least it was a smile.

“Thanks, Raph. That…that really means a lot to me,” Leo said.

“Do you know why you had a panic attack?”

Leo looked down. One of his hands rose to grasp at the edge of his plastron beneath his shoulder. His knuckles were almost white with the force of the grip. Raph wanted to reach over and make Leo stop, but he kept his own hands to himself.

“I um…I just couldn’t…couldn’t stop thinking about how I’ll never have any of that again,” Leo said. Leo hadn’t specified what he meant by ‘that’, but it didn’t matter. Whatever it was about this place that allowed them to understand each other without words revealed Leo’s meaning to Raph intuitively.

Leo believed he would never again have a Christmas day with his family. He believed he would never have *any* day with his family. Raph felt Leo’s terrible confidence that the remainder of his life would be spent here in this horrible place. They had once believed each other’s faces would be the last thing they saw before they died. Now, they had been replaced with cruel and callous faces, the *only* faces he had seen for so long now. He would never again be looked at with love or kindness, only cold and calculating observation. Never a brother, never a son, never a person. Only a subject. Only an *animal*.

“That’s not true,” Raph said. How could Leo *believe* any of that? Raph wanted to think that somehow this strange understanding was wrong, but he knew that it could not be. There was nothing but truth here.

“It is,” Leo said flatly. “I’m…I’m done.”

“Like *hell* you are.”

Raph had whipped his head around so fast to say this that he was surprised his neck hadn’t cracked. He looked at Leo and felt his brother’s shock at Raph’s intensity. Raph tried to ignore the feedback loop of experiencing his own anger and frustration from Leo’s perception.

“You are *not* giving up, Leo. I won’t *let* you.”

“I can’t keep fighting them. Every time I think I can handle it long enough to escape, I *can’t*. It just makes everything *worse*.”

“Then let *me*. I was *made* to fight, Leo. I know I was. Let *me* fight,” Raph demanded.

“I can’t do that!” Leo said, shocked.

“But you did it just now,” Raph said, gesturing around at the room. “You needed help, and you brought me here. You let me…take over.”

“Even if I wanted you to take over to fight for me, which I *don’t*, it’s not that easy. I can’t just call you to do this whenever, Raph” Leo argued.

“Why?”

“Because you’re not good enough.”

Raph felt like Leo had punched him.

“Wait, no, no, Raph! That’s not what I meant!” Leo scrambled to explain, obviously having felt Raph’s pain. “You’re…you’re so capable and talented and…and *determined*. I know you can do

anything. I don't know why, but you *are* suddenly getting better at all this. But you're still not there yet."

"Then I'll *get* there. I'm not afraid to put in the work. Just tell me how, Leo. Tell me how to get good enough at this to *help* you."

"No."

"…What?"

"No. I won't help you with this."

Again, Raph felt Leo's words like a physical blow. This time, however, it wasn't hurt that Raph felt; it was white hot *rage*.

"What the *fuck* is your problem?"

Raph was on his feet now, snarling down at Leo. He knew better, but Raph felt his anger consume him. Raph watched the shock on Leo's face quickly become anger as well.

"Calm *down*, Raph."

"I'll calm down when you start making some fucking *sense,*" Raph bit back. This was the clearest he had ever been able to think in here. Part of him resented the fact that he was wasting this rare clarity on fighting with Leo, but he *had* to get Leo to be reasonable here.

"If they find out you have it too, even if you can just barely do it—" Leo ignored Raph's indignant scoff, "—then they'll come for *you*, Raph. I didn't hand myself over just for you to wind up here, too."

"I didn't fucking *ask* you to sacrifice yourself for me."

“Don’t be selfish,” Leo spat. “You *know* it wasn’t just for you.”

“That’s not what I fucking mean and you know it.”

“You were selfish back then, too!” Leo said, absolutely seething. He got to his feet to look Raph square in the eye as he spoke. “I told you not to follow and you *still* did! You put *everyone* else at risk. If I hadn’t stopped you long enough to buy time, you could have gotten people *killed*, Raph. *You* almost got killed!”

Raph knew Leo was right. He wanted to defend himself, but he knew could not. What he had done was senseless and indefensible. Raph had let his emotions rule him and chased after Leo despite the risks. It could have resulted in so much worse than a bullet wound.

“Do you have *any idea* how hard that was for me?” Leo ground out so low it was nearly a whisper. “I will *hate* myself for the rest of my *fucking life* for what I did to you.”

“I don’t care about that, Leo. I was mad about it for a long time, but you’re right. You had to because you knew I wouldn’t listen.”

Some of the rage in Leo’s eyes faded. Raph took the opportunity to keep going.

“It took me *so long* to understand that you were right. I can recognize that now. I can *admit* that now. I’ve…I’ve changed so much since you left, Leo. I swear.”

“I know you have,” Leo relented. His shoulders fell ever so slightly. “And I’m really proud of you.”

The praise was like a warm blanket that Raph wanted to curl up in, but Leo snatched that warmth away before he had the chance.

“But I *still* won’t help you.”

Raph jolted awake, and he found himself fighting a wave of vertigo from sitting up in bed so quickly. His fists were clenched just about as tight as his jaw was. He forced himself to stop gnashing his teeth long enough to suck in a breath. He felt his face contort in anger as he wrenched open the drawer of his nightstand.

He grabbed Leo's book and glared at it as his knuckles grew white on its spine. He wanted to chuck it at the wall, wanted to watch the spine tear, wanted to see the pages fall out and scatter on the floor. If he could get his hands to move, he would do it. If he could make his fingers work, he'd tear the pages out himself. He would *ruin* this stupid fucking book, if only he could *move*.

But Raph was frozen, his rage rooting him in place. He could do nothing but glower down at the book in his lap like it had mortally wronged him. It wasn't until he registered the feeling of his fingernails digging into the back cover that Raph snapped out of it.

He dropped the book onto the sheets and looked at his hands in disgust. What the *fuck* was he doing? This was *Leo's*. This book had meant *so much* to Leo. It had meant so much to Splinter, and now to Raph himself. Splinter had given such a precious treasure to Raph, and he was fantasizing about *destroying* it.

Raph felt a new urge rise, and he jumped out of bed. He wasn't going to make it down the hall. Instead, he grabbed the trashcan under his desk. Christmas dinner made a violent encore as Raph heaved and retched into the can. Shaking and wiping at the corner of his mouth, Raph whispered out loud to himself in horror.

"What the fuck is wrong with me?"

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit, I am so sorry this update took for fucking ever. I've been up against a deadline for a major project at work and have been working overtime, so all of my time and energy had been put into that. I was also crazy sick for a couple weeks.

Also…I am an elder millennial, and I have no fucking idea how teenage gen z boys speak over text message. Sincerest apologies to any younger folks who found the text conversation to be less than believable, but this tired dinosaur is trying her best T-T

Chapter 10: Clinical Terms

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph:

Dr. Hart, I'm sorry to bother you the day after a holiday. Our next appointment isn't for a week, but can I call you today?

Raph had rewritten his text message to Dr. Hart several times over the past few minutes, and was finally satisfied with this final draft. It was still early, and he had no idea what sort of time his therapist typically slept until. He didn't even know if she was *married.* If he sent this now and her notifications weren't silenced, would he wake both her and her partner up? He felt ashamed to realize he had never asked her any of these things. Raph had spent the past two years talking to this woman, and he didn't know any of what *should* be the simplest details about her life. Whenever meeting with her, all Raph had ever done was think about himself.

That's the point though, Raph thought privately. *She's supposed to help you. And you need it. You're allowed to ask for help.*

Raph wasn't sure why that last thought felt so ironic, but he still knew it was true. His stomach lurched as he hit send and his phone began ringing almost immediately. He felt his face burn as he swiped to answer her call. He wanted to apologize, but Dr. Hart spoke before Raph could so much as take a breath.

"Where are you right now, Raphael?" Dr. Hart asked quickly over the line.

Raph's surprise at the question was quickly replaced by embarrassment. He had to swallow the lump in his throat to answer.

"Home," Raph rasped into the phone. "My—my room."

"Are you considering harming yourself?"

"*No*," Raph tried to keep his voice steady, but the crushing shame and humiliation of her question made it impossible. He had calmed down just enough to parse out the text message, but with Dr. Hart now on the line with him, the gravity of what he had nearly done was back and crashing down *hard*. Raph felt tears begin to spill over as he spoke wetly into the phone. "I'm just, I'm—*freaking out*, I don't—don't understand what the fuck is *happening* to me!"

Raph could hear Dr. Hart take a breath to respond, but he cut her off. He screwed up his face, clutching it with his free hand as he whispered frantically into the phone.

*"*I think—I think there might be something *wrong* with me.*"*

Ice ran through Raph's veins as it dawned on him what he had just said. It might have been *what* he wanted to say, but it wasn't *how* he would have said it. Because those were not Raph's words, but *borrowed* ones. He had heard them two years ago. *Leo* had spoken that *exact* sentence to Raph…just hours before he had been taken.

Why had he said it that way? Why had he said it *exactly* like Leo? There *was* something wrong with him. Raph knew Dr. Hart was speaking, but he could not hear her over the static engulfing his brain. It wasn't until a certain word made it through the white noise that he could make out what she was saying.

"—**father's** phone number. I can call him to come help you."

"No!" Raph yelped. "No, I don't need—*please* don't call him!"

"Are you in immediate danger from him or anyone else, Raphael?"

"No, no, no, I swear, it's not—it's *nothing* like that," Raph begged her to understand. "He *wouldn't*, you *know* he wouldn't. I just…I can't, can't talk to him, not about *this.* It…it would fucking *kill* him."

"Was this triggered by something your father said or did?"

"No. I mean…maybe? I don't—I don't *know*," Raph swallowed, then added in frustration "I'm so *confused.*"

"Let's go over this together, Raph," Dr. Hart said patiently. It wasn't often that she called him by his shortened name instead of his full name. When Raph had first started seeing her, Dr. Hart had asked what he preferred to be called. Still raw from being forced to talk to '*a fucking shrink*', Raph had been too obstinate to give her an answer. She had defaulted to Raph's full name, and Raph had regretted his stubbornness ever since. 'Raphael' was what he was known as by the world at large, and the only other person close to him who ever called him Raphael was Splinter.

"Can you take me through any recent interactions with your father?" Dr. Hart asked, and Raph grunted in frustration. He hadn't wanted to talk to her about his dad. He wanted to know why he was going *fucking insane*.

But Raph knew Dr. Hart was no amateur. She almost certainly knew Raph wouldn't be able to come clean on his own. He would need to be led there, and unfortunately, Splinter was almost always a good starting point for whatever was eating at Raph.

"Yesterday. Christmas," Raph said haltingly. He took a breath and tried to collect himself, wiping away a few tears as he did. "He didn't…he didn't do anything *wrong*. It was just like you said."

"He made an attempt to reconcile in some way?"

Raph nodded, but realized after a beat of silence that Dr. Hard could not see him. He rushed to continue.

"Yeah…He uh, gave me something of…something of Leo's."

"What was it?"

Raph opened his mouth to respond. Instead of words, a poorly stifled sob escaped past Raph's lips. He curled in on himself as he cried into the phone.

"You don't need to tell me what it was," Dr. Hart said softly into his ear after a few moments. "That's fine. Let's focus on why it's—"

"*A book*," Raph gasped. He didn't want to tell her, because it meant getting closer to the truth of what he had almost done to it. After two years of therapy, though, Raph knew that what he *wanted* and what he *needed* weren't always the same thing. What he *needed* was to get this out in the open, no matter how painful it might be. If he didn't, it would eat him from the inside out.

"Was this book special to Leonardo?"

"He was fucking *obsessed* with it," Raph said, somewhere between laughing and crying.

"Did your father say anything when he gave it to you?"

"He said he…he wanted me to have a, a *piece* of Leo. And that…that he shouldn't've…that Leo's *stuff* didn't matter more than *me*."

"And that's true," Dr. Hard said. "Your father has been extremely protective of Leonardo's space and things, but—"

"It *does* matter, though!" Raph shot back, interrupting her. "It, it *matters*, and I wanted—I almost—"

Raph broke into another series of uncontrollable sobs. He was glad Dr. Hart couldn't see the way his free arm wrapped around himself, or how tightly he had sucked his knees up to his chest.

"Did you want to get rid of Leonardo's book?" Dr. Hart asked

"*Worse*," Raph hissed. "I wanted to—to fucking *ruin* it."

"I know it may have scared and upset you to feel that impulse, Raphael, but that's a very normal reaction—"

"How the *fuck* is that *normal?!"*

Raph didn't feel normal. He felt just as batshit crazy as everyone thought he was.

"This is not the first time you've expressed anger toward your brother for what happened. Wanting to throw away or destroy things that belong to someone who has wronged you is very common when we're experiencing such strong emotions. Until now, you've had nothing of his to take your frustrations out on."

"I thought I was over it," Raph groaned into the phone. "I'm not…maybe I'm not fucking *okay* with what he did, but I *get* it. He…he *had* to. He didn't have a choice. I…I understand that. I even fucking *respect* it."

"I'm sure you're quite tired of hearing this, but recovery—"

"— *'isn't linear'*. Yeah, I know, I know," Raph finished for her. He'd heard that little missive about a thousand times by now. Raph managed to take a few deep breaths, each exhale hitching slightly less than the last.

"Putting an undue amount of significance on a loved one's belongings is also a very typical reaction after loss. We've talked before about how your father may have taken this to an unhealthy extreme with Leonardo's things and his room, especially with how it impacted your relationship. Again, I am not his therapist, and I can only guess as to how he's feeling, and you two are on very different

journeys through this. You're both taking your own individual paths. But, those paths may very well be headed toward a convergence."

"What's that gotta do with Leo's book, though?" Raph asked, trying not to sound overly frustrated.

"You still feel very apprehensive about trying to resolve things with your father. Him relinquishing something of Leonardo's to you is the sort of good-will gesture that most likely means he's willing to begin that process."

"Fuck, I know, *I know*," Raph groaned.

"I remember that you didn't really care for clinical terms and definitions before, but you seemed to have warmed up to them over the past year. Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know…It's nice to know sometimes that there's a reason why things work the way they do, I guess."

"I agree," Dr. Hart said. "You told me after Thanksgiving how you believed that knowing how things work is something that comforts Donatello."

"I mean, he *is* the smartest of us," Raph said with a weak little laugh. "Brainy stuff's always been his comfort zone."

"You're extremely smart, too, Raphael. Much more so than many people your age I've met. I imagine having an understanding of why certain things 'work the way they do' may be comforting to *you* as well. So if you'd like me to, I can explain in a more technical way why I think Splinter's gift has upset you so much."

"Okay," Raph rasped into the phone.

"There's a concept in social psychology that calls for actions from one party to be returned in an equal manner by the receiving party. More simply put, it's the notion of an equal give-and-take between people. For example, if I tell you an embarrassing story at my own expense, then *you* might tell me one of your own. Or if you reveal a secret to me, I would feel compelled to tell you one as well to

make the exchange equal. Much of how interpersonal relationships develop and grow can be boiled down to this social norm called *reciprocity*."

Raph sniffled a little as he nodded, knowing Dr. Hart couldn't see but not caring. She seemed to have understood, though, and continued her explanation.

"Reciprocity is such a foundational social behavior, in fact, that it's often referred to as the Law of Reciprocity. Although it's often framed as such, reciprocation is not a strictly positive act. Just as much as it can be used to deepen and strengthen relationships, it can also be used maliciously or even manipulatively. You'll find no shortage of books and articles on how to use reciprocity in the business world or politics to get things you want from others."

"So it can be good or bad," Raph summarized.

"Precisely. And sometimes it's a bit of both. I do not believe Splinter intended his gift to be negative in any way. Right now, you might be feeling as if you're *obligated* to return your father's gesture in some way, or to somehow show him you're willing to begin repairing your relationship together. However, you also feel that you are not ready to do this, so you cannot reciprocate despite feeling compelled to do so. Because reciprocity is so fundamental to our relationships, it can be extremely powerful, so resisting it can be difficult or distressing."

"So you think…I'm freaking out because I think I gotta…do the same thing he did for me?"

"Do you think that's accurate?"

Raph wanted it to make sense, but it just didn't. He hadn't been thinking of Splinter when he'd woken up and nearly torn the book to shreds. Raph hadn't even been thinking of Leo. It was the book itself that seemed to be the sole object of his rage. Even still, he was scared to so much as look at it where it lay abandoned on his bed. But maybe Dr. Hart was right, and Raph just couldn't see it. Maybe this was all subconscious. That felt like a bit of a cop out, but if it made Raph stop feeling *this* terrible, maybe he was willing to take it for now.

"I don't *know*," Raph finally answered. "But I guess…I guess it makes sense."

"And that's alright if you're not entirely sure," Dr. Hart told him. "That's perfectly fine. What matters right now is whether or not you're feeling like you're still in crisis mode."

“I don’t…I don’t think I am,” Raph breathed. He wasn’t satisfied with Dr. Hart’s explanation of why he’d woken up ready to completely trash the one thing of Leo’s he now owned, or why it had scared him so badly. But he also knew she wasn’t entirely off base. Raph *had* been sure that Splinter would want something from him in return for the book, even if he hadn’t explicitly said so. “I think I’m good…I’m um…I’m really sorry I bothered you with something so stupid.”

“Not at all. And Raphael, I don’t at all mean to diminish what you’re feeling right now, but I am not surprised you wanted to talk to me before our next appointment.”

“Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence, doc,” Raph said, hoping he sounded more sarcastic than hurt.

“The holidays are typically the most difficult time of year for mental health. Even people who typically do not struggle with their mental health can feel extremely stressed or experience feelings of depression around the holidays. So much of how we celebrate the holidays revolves around family dynamics and tradition. Losing a family member upends those dynamics, and their absence can be amplified when trying to carry on traditions without them. *You* have the added element of having lost a family member around the holidays, which only adds to the emotional stress of this time of year.”

“So I was just doomed to fail, huh?” Raph quipped with a little too much bitterness.

“Feeling is not failure.”

Raph sat with that for a moment before taking a deep breath, exhaling long and slow before responding with a soft “okay.”

“As terrible as this feels right now, you shouldn’t feel discouraged by this,” Dr. Hart said.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Raph said, pivoting the conversation.

“Sure.”

“Are you uh…like, married or anything?”

Dr. Hart let out a small, surprised laugh.

"I'm not," she said, and Raph could tell by her voice that she was smiling. "Though I'm wondering what prompted the question."

"Was worried I might've woke both of you up or something," Raph mumbled. "I'm um…I'm sorry if I woke *you* up, at least."

"I wouldn't have given you my number for emergencies if I hadn't been prepared to answer it whenever you needed," Dr. Hart said. "You're also not the first of my patients to use it recently. You don't need to be worried about using it again."

"I'm sorta hoping this is a one-time kinda thing," Raph told her with a sad attempt at a laugh.

"I understand. But it's okay if it isn't."

Dr. Hart stayed on the phone with Raph a little while longer, clearly wanting to make sure Raph was alright before letting him go. It was a little awkward, but Raph appreciated it as the tightness in his muscles slowly dissolved. He'd stopped crying entirely before they finally ended the call, but Raph still felt grimy. He usually waited until after his morning workout to shower, but he opted to skip out on a trip to the dojo for a second day in a row and instead left his room for the shower.

When the Lair had been expanded, they'd finally built not one, but multiple real bathrooms. Growing up, they'd had a tub with a shower curtain shoved into one of the crannies of the main living area, just on the other side of the short wall that divided the kitchen. The detachable shower head had even doubled as their kitchen sink faucet. Splinter had rigged up a porta potty to an exposed sewer pipe to create a somewhat functioning toilet. The setup had never allowed for much privacy, which hadn't mattered much until the cousins moved in.

Raph thought it might be a massive understatement to say the bathrooms were a major upgrade. Besides having his own room, it was his favorite thing about the improvements to the Lair. There was just *nothing* like a hot shower to decompress. With how often Raph found himself heading off to the shower, it was a good thing their water was essentially free (*stolen*). Otherwise, Splinter would be paying a *fortune* in water utilities.

Raph was halfway to the bathroom he shared with his brothers when he felt a cold chill of dread run down the back of his neck. It took him a moment to understand why, but a muffled sound was coming from behind Mikey's bedroom door. The sound of *crying*.

As Raph drew closer, he could make out that Mikey wasn't just crying. He was taking in raspy, shuddering breaths, followed by deep sobs. They were the kind you felt in your chest. The kind Raph had been feeling less than an hour ago in his own room.

"Mikey," Raph said as he rapped his knuckles on his brother's door. There was no answer, even after knocking louder. Raph knew he was invading Mikey's privacy as he turned the doorknob, but he could not stop himself. Not while Mikey's pitiful sobs battered his eardrums like canons.

He pushed the door open to see Mikey tangled in his blankets. One of his hands was balled in his favorite fleece blanket, the other grasping tightly at the edge of his plastron. The position made Raph's stomach lurch for reasons he could not name. He rushed forward to gently take hold of Mikey's wrist, prying his hand away as he spoke softly to his brother.

"Mikey, Mikey, hey, wake up," Raph rubbed his free hand up and down Mikey's arm. It wasn't until Mikey's hand tried to break free of Raph's grip that he startled awake.

"R-Raph!" Mikey gasped with wide, tear-filled eyes. He launched at Raph for a frantic and uncoordinated attempt at a hug. Raph let Mikey latch onto him, and Mikey began mumbling into Raph's shoulder. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"Mikey, whoa," Raph cooed as he gently hugged back. "It's okay buddy."

"It's not!" Mikey bawled. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

"Didn't mean to what, Mikey?"

Mikey twitched violently in Raph's arms at the question, then stilled.

"I…I don't know," Mikey said slowly. He gulped and pulled away, looking at Raph with a strained expression. He looked so young and small and *confused.* The way Mikey looked at him as if *he* might have the answer made Raph's heart hurt. When it was clear Raph couldn't give him an explanation, Mikey's face crumpled. He fell back into Raph's chest and resumed crying.

At least this way, Mikey couldn't see that Raph had, too.

Chapter End Notes

Deleted the old super long and rambly author's note that was here originally lol

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Art by @eatingdirtsnortingworms Tumblr

Chapter 11: This Can’t Go On Forever

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Mikey cried for what felt like an eternity. Dr. Hart may have helped Raph calm down enough to not fully panic earlier, but seeing his little brother so upset and lost had tipped Raph over the edge once more. Raph had only let himself cry for a moment, though, pulling himself together before Mikey noticed. When Donnie found them still in Mikey’s room sometime later, Raph’s hard-won composure just about crumbled seeing the panicked concern on Donnie’s face.

“What’s wrong with Mikey?” Donnie asked Raph, pale and tense in Mikey’s doorway.

“He…he had a nightmare, I think,” Raph told him, Mikey still pressed tightly against his plastron.

“About what?” Donnie asked, finally shuffling into Mikey’s room and closing the door. Mikey could only shake his head.

“I d-don’t remember…” Mikey sniffled as he pulled away from Raph to wipe furiously at his messy face. “Sorry, this is so stupid…I’m s-sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Mikey. It’s *not* stupid,” Raph said. “I have them too, sometimes.”

“Me, uh…me too, Mikey,” Donnie croaked.

“Y-you do?” Mikey hiccupped, looking from one brother to the next uncertainly.

“It’s like, pretty normal for people who, y’know…went through something as fucked up as we did. At least, that’s what Dr. Hart says,” Raph told them both, not meeting their eyes. Raph was the only one of them with scars and a formal PTSD diagnosis, but he knew his brothers had not come out entirely unscathed. Raph remembered how frequently he’d walked in on Mikey sobbing into Splinter’s shoulder after, or how Donnie’s glasses had seemed to sharply frame the hollowness of his eyes.

Slowly, Mikey had begun to cry less and smile more. Donnie’s uncharacteristic silence was steadily replaced with his biting sarcasm. Though the intensity of his brothers’ grief had gradually waned over time, Raph knew all too well how easily the pain and anxiety could return when least expected.

“Is not remembering them normal?” Mikey asked, and Raph’s stomach lurched. It was still startling how often Mikey and Donnie looked to Raph for answers now.

“I uh…I don’t know,” Raph answered honestly. Raph knew he had dreams he couldn’t remember. Didn’t everybody? But he only *wished* he could forget the nightmares. Even if it was unusual for Mikey not to remember, Raph was glad he didn’t.

“I feel like I did something really bad or…or something,” Mikey said in a whisper. He was looking down at his hands, and Raph could see tears gathering in his eyes once more. “I feel like…*guilty*.”

Raph nearly flinched at Mikey’s admission. Dr. Hart may have brought Raph back from the brink of crisis, but he had not yet been able to let go of his *own* guilt from this morning.

“This is so *dumb*,” Mikey growled, balling his fists in his blankets with obvious frustration. “Why do I feel like trash? Yesterday was like, the *best*.”

“Maybe yesterday’s the problem,” Raph said slowly. “And maybe…maybe I’m the problem, too.”

“What?” Mikey said, startled. “What do you mean?”

Raph wasn’t sure he was ready to have this conversation. He was still raw from this morning, still upset and hurt and confused. Admitting to his failures was difficult, but Raph could not deny the relief it often gave him. Telling Dr. Hart what he’d almost done to Leo’s book had been beyond painful, but confessing had been cathartic. Until he could apologize to Leo for what he’d nearly done, however, it would continue to weigh on him.

But Mikey and Donnie were right here. Raph could apologize to them now, and as much as he was unprepared to do it, he knew he needed to. Of all his regrets, *this* was one of the largest.

“I never, um…” Raph began nervously. “I never said sorry for how much shit I gave you guys for, y’know…moving on.”

Donnie grimaced and Mikey tensed beside Raph on the bed. He didn’t blame them.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, when there had still been some hope of recovering Leo, life had come to a complete standstill for everyone in the Lair. There were no video games, no movie nights, and definitely no fucking ice skating. Every moment of every day was spent in agonizing anticipation and hope that someone, whether it be the NYPD or the FBI, might find some new lead on Leo.

But as time wore on, Raph was left the sole custodian of that hope. It had driven him *insane* to watch everyone gradually give up. He became an absolute fucking *terror* when his family had slipped back into something that resembled their life before Leo’s absence.

“I couldn’t fucking handle watching everyone just…y’know, going back to normal, so I made you guys feel like shit for it. That was really messed up and I know now that I shouldn’t have done any of that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s…it’s okay,” Mikey said nervously. “You were hurt, and really conf—”

Mikey cut himself off, and Raph hated watching his brother brace for impact.

Raph knew what he'd been about to say. *Confused*. That's what they'd all kept telling him, before the diagnosis, before therapy. Raph had fucking hated it. He'd railed against it so much that eventually everyone stopped saying it to his face altogether. Raph's *condition* was just…implied. Unspoken.

"You're fine, Mikey," Raph sighed as he reached out to bring Mikey in for a quick squeeze of a hug. "But you're wrong, because it *wasn't* okay. Being…the way I am isn't an excuse. I made you guys feel like just living your lives was a fucking crime. We had a really, really good day yesterday, and I dunno…maybe you still have all that shit I used to say in the back of your mind making you feel guilty for it."

Donnie shifted uncomfortably, and Mikey refused to meet Raph's eyes. *Bingo*.

"But, I dunno…I don't think Leo would want you guys to just be like, fucking *miserable* all the time. So I'm sorry that I said all that shit. I don't want you guys to feel guilty for not being like me."

"But you're…y'know, living *your* life now, too," Mikey murmured timidly.

"Yeah, because I don't have a *choice*," Raph huffed, and he saw both his brothers' eyes flit toward his shell where they knew the tracker was.

"I wish that wasn't the *only* thing making you live your life," Donnie grumbled darkly. He had balled up his hands in the sleeves of his hoodie, then shoved them into the front pocket.

"Wait, fuck, sorry," Raph groaned, putting a hand over his face. "I'm not trying to be a dick, and I'm not trying to make this about me."

"It is about you, though," Donnie shot back. "Dude, we don't want you to feel like shit, either. You said it yourself that Leo wouldn't want that. You don't have to keep doing this to yourself."

"Can we please not fucking do this right now," Raph pleaded weakly, hand still covering his face. "Please, Donnie."

“We’re gonna have to, sometime. This…this can’t go on forever, Raph.”

Raph was not ready for this, not after it had been so long since his brothers’ last attempt.

Shortly after Leo’s statue had gone up, Donnie and Mikey had begun periodically cornering Raph to try talking ‘sense’ into him. His brothers would sit him down and practically beg him to accept that Leo was gone for good, that he was doing nothing but hurting himself by refusing to believe it. Raph had just barely tolerated the first handful of little ‘interventions’, but after a few months, he’d had enough. Their efforts had abruptly ended after one of these conversations devolved into a shoving match in Raph’s room. Raph had thought his brothers had given up and left him for his therapist to deal with.

“Donnie, I’m serious, I can’t do this today,” Raph croaked, dropping his hand and looking at his brother pleadingly.

“When, then?” Donnie fumed, pulling his hands out of his hoodie pocket to toss them up in annoyance. “God Raph, I’m sorry, but this is just so fucking *frustrating*. It’s like…like we *almost* have you back, but part of you just isn’t even *here*.”

Donnie was right, because that part of him was with Leo. Raph would never be whole again until Leo was home. He hadn’t meant to bring them to this dangerous topic of discussion. Raph had only wanted to make Mikey feel better. He looked over to Mikey, hoping he might try and make Donnie drop it.

“Maybe you’re right I *am* beating myself up for having fun yesterday, I don’t know,” Mikey said softly. “But Raph…you’ve been beating *yourself* up for two years now. You don’t do anything fun unless it’s with us. You don’t even wrestle anymore.”

“But that’s—it wouldn’t be fair, I got too strong—”

“That’s not it, and I think you know it,” Mikey pushed back. “Dude, you…you gotta take your own advice. Donnie’s right; Leo wouldn’t want you to be miserable, either.”

“Yeah, I’m not doing this,” Raph declared, standing up and leaving Mikey on his bed. He stalked past Donnie and wrenched open Mikey’s bedroom door, ignoring Donnie and Mikey’s protests as he closed it behind him.

Instead of heading for the shower like he had intended before hearing Mikey, Raph returned to his room. He threw on some clothes, briefly checking the weather on his phone to make sure he had enough layers on. He laced his shoes sloppily, fingers trembling.

His brothers were in the hall when Raph left his room. Mikey opened his mouth as if to say something, but Raph cut him off with a snarl.

“I’m not *fucking miserable*.”

Raph stormed out of the Lair for the surface. He *hated* this. Hated his brothers ganging up on him. Hated that they didn’t believe him. Hated that they thought he was something to fix. Hated that they kept trying.

But most of all, he hated lying.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the micro-chapter, and that it took so long to update. Real life got intense there for a minute.

Next up: Casey Jones to the rescue.

Chapter 12: Real Shit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph:

You up?

Casey:

Yeah, what's up?

Raph:

Can we hang? Just gotta get out of the sewer for a bit

Casey:

I'm working on unpacking shit for my mom

Might be kinda boring but you can hang here if you want

And I mean my place aint much better than a sewer lol

Raph didn't care if they hung out in Casey's apartment or a dumpster. He'd left the sewers with no destination, no plan, no clear objective beyond getting the fuck out of the Lair. He didn't care that he'd just be sitting there while Casey did chores. If it meant getting away from his brothers for a few hours, Raph would do just about anything.

Raph:

Your mom won't care?

Casey:

She's at work

Thank god, Raph thought to himself. It had been a while since he'd had to do the awkward song and dance of meeting a friends' parents, and Raph didn't think he'd ever been less mentally prepared for that situation.

Casey:

Here's my address

I'll meet you outside

Raph pulled Casey's place up in his maps app, and realized it was just a few blocks from Eastman. Eager as he was to put some distance between himself and his own home, it didn't take long to get there. As Raph approached the building, he had to agree with Casey's assessment; it wasn't *the* shittiest place on the block, but it was a close second. Casey was standing out front in sweatpants and a jacket.

"Yeesh. You look like shit," Casey greeted Raph with a sympathetic pinch of his eyebrows. "Rough Christmas?"

“Christmas was great. Was this morning that sucked ass,” Raph grumbled.

“Dad bullshit?”

“*Brother* bullshit.”

“Oh,” Casey responded, looking surprised. “I thought you were like, pretty good with them now.”

“Yeah, me too,” Raph huffed.

“C’mon, it’s fucking freezing,” Casey said, turning to open the building’s main door and Raph following close behind. Raph watched Casey’s forehead crease in frustration as he headed for the stairs instead of the elevator. “Gonna have to hoof it. Elevator’s broke.”

“S’fine,” Raph said, honestly not giving a shit about it. He used to scale the sides of buildings like it was nothing, so a few flights of stairs were no big deal. Raph wasn’t even remotely winded when they finally made it to Casey’s floor.

“Sorry, place is a mess,” Casey said as he turned the key to his unit’s door, revealing a small, cramped apartment. Every available surface seemed to be piled high with cardboard boxes. “Still unpacking and shit. We’ve been here like two months, but my mom’s been working crazy hours, so I’m doing this as like, a Christmas gift. I kept offering to do it, but she’s all ‘*oh no, I’ll do it after work*’. She always comes home dead fucking tired, though. She’s gonna pretend to be mad I did it for her, but I think we’ll both be happy to just finally have it done.”

“What’s she do for work?”

“Retail manager,” Casey told Raph as they both kicked off their shoes in the entryway. Unable to resist the habit learned from ninja training, Raph tried his best to get a lay of the apartment underneath the mountains of boxes. The kitchen was tucked into the corner immediately to the right of the entry, the only division between it and the living room being a very worn looking kitchen table. An open door on the left revealed a small bathroom, and Raph could only assume the closed door next to it was a bedroom.

“The Christmas season is always fucking insane for her, then there’s all the people returning shit, and then they gotta totally reorganize the store after Christmas,” Casey continued as he tossed his jacket over the back of a chair at the table. He gestured for Raph to do the same. “And technically she’s an *assistant* manager, but she does all her shitty boss’ work anyway. Doesn’t get paid for it, though. I love her and all, but my mom is *shit* at standing up for herself.”

“Hey, at least she’s got a job,” Raph tried to joke as he deposited his jacket. “We’re still just like, living off all those donations and shit…”

After being discovered, they certainly couldn’t have gone on just stealing everything they needed to live. Splinter had coached Raph and his brothers to act as if they had survived all these years by scavenging, rather than shoplifting and raiding containers at the shipping yards. Heroes or not, it was *probably* going to be hard for the humans to overlook 15 years of stolen goods.

The unintended consequence of their lie, however, was that the humans had felt sorry enough for the mutants to set up a GoFundMe for them. Raph hadn’t been quite as mortified as Leo when the campaign had launched, but he had grown more uncomfortable about it with every passing year.

“What, not a fan of free money?”

“Would *you* like everyone acting like you’re a fucking charity case?” Raph snapped, and immediately felt like an asshole. Casey had invited him into his home at the drop of a hat, and here he was being a dick to him. “…sorry, dude. It’s just, y’know, kinda embarrassing.”

“It’s cool, I getcha. I don’t like getting somethin’ for nothin’ either.” Casey conceded. “*Buuuut* I also wouldn’t turn my nose up at being able to afford a two-bedroom.”

Casey nodded to the far side of the living space toward a large cube bookshelf further into the living room. Donnie had a similar one in his room he used to display all his anime figures and collectables, but the one in Casey’s living room was full of flimsy fabric storage cubes. As Casey led Raph around the other side of it, he realized it was being used as a partition to divide the living room in two. The half closest to the kitchen had a sofa and a small tv, the other half on the other side of the bookshelf apparently serving as Casey’s bedroom.

Casey’s bed was shoved into the corner, a small desk beside it with his laptop and a pile of schoolwork. A freestanding clothes rack held a collection of Casey’s clothes, most of which seemed

to be hockey jerseys or hoodies. Socks and shorts were spilling out of an open duffel bag on the floor, and a plastic laundry basket was filled to the brim with a stack of folded pants.

Casey rolled his desk chair toward Raph to sit in, then sat on the floor between a couple of open boxes to keep unpacking. While Casey began transferring the contents of the boxes into the fabric bins in the bookshelf, Raph rolled himself in the desk chair just past the foot of Casey's bed to look out the only window in the apartment.

"Not much of a view," Casey mumbled from the floor.

"Neither is a fucking sewer grate, dude."

Casey huffed a little in amusement, and Raph knew his friend understood what he'd *really* meant; Raph wasn't judging Casey for his circumstances, and he wasn't pitying him. They'd both been dealt a shitty hand, and it wasn't the fault of either of them.

"You want one of these?" Casey asked, reaching under his desk where a pack of orange Gatorade sat. Raph nodded, easily catching the bottle Casey none-too-gently tossed at him. Raph twisted off the cap and flung it at Casey's head. Casey only laughed and set himself to the task of unpacking.

Slowly sipping the sports drink and listening to Casey rummage through boxes, Raph began to let himself untense for the first time all morning. Raph knew he shouldn't have left the Lair in the middle of an argument, but he had truly been at his limit. Walking in on Mikey's nightmare immediately after his panicked call with Dr. Hart and the crisis of what he had nearly done to Leo's book, Raph hadn't had a single moment yet today to just *fucking* breathe.

It should have been weird. Here he was, just staring out a window at nothing in particular, in the apartment of someone he'd known less than two months but already considered his best friend. But it *wasn't* weird, and Raph let himself unwind in the comfortable silence and contentment of Casey's presence.

Casey seemed to just know that a moment to cool off was what Raph needed. He didn't say anything until Raph had finished his drink and relaxed enough to kick his feet up to rest on the end of the bed.

"So, what did your brothers do that's got you runnin' out on 'em?"

“Hey, fuck y—"

“C’mon dude,” Casey chuckled, cutting Raph off. “I’ve stormed outta the house enough times to know what it looks like.”

“…They just got on my case about Leo again,” Raph relented with a sigh, choosing to look out the window at another shitty apartment building instead of at Casey. “I dunno. I guess it’s my own fault. I walked right into it.”

“Whaddya mean?” Casey asked, and the genuine interest in Casey’s voice made Raph finally look over at him.

“Dude…why are you always putting up with my bullshit?”

“Wait, what?” Casey laughed, looking both amused and confused.

“I feel like all I ever do is complain to you, man. I know we like, made a *deal*, but this doesn’t really feel like a fair trade for you.” Raph explained. He hadn’t been able to fully understand why Casey’s receptiveness bothered him until his phone call with Dr. Hart that morning. Raph was getting something from Casey, but was Casey really getting anything in exchange?

“I’m not ‘putting up with’ anything, dude,” Casey laughed. “*Casey Fuckin’ Jones* doesn’t ‘put up with’ *nothin’*.”

“That doesn’t explain what you’re getting out of just listening to me fucking whine all the time,” Raph shot back. To Raph’s surprise, Casey looked a little embarrassed as he answered.

“I dunno, man…This is cheesy as fuck, but I’ve never really gotten do to this before.”

“Never gotten to do what?”

“Y’know, talk about *real* shit with someone. Everyone on my team, guys at school like Tim, all they wanna talk to me about is stupid shit that doesn’t matter. And *sure*, I like talking about hockey and dumb stuff, too. But *you* talk to me about actual important stuff…and I think it’s because you’re like, the first person I’ve met who isn’t afraid of me.”

Raph couldn’t stop his eyebrows from shooting up at that.

“Ok, well now *you* get to do the talking, because what the fuck does *that* mean?”

“Is what it is, man,” Casey shrugged. “I wasn’t joking when I said I wasn’t from the nice little hipster part of Brooklyn. Shit was pretty rough back home. So, y’know…I had to be rough *back*. My dad’s a piece of shit, but if there was ever one thing he taught me, it was how to make sure people thought twice about fuckin’ with you.”

Raph didn’t need Casey to spell out what he really meant, because he’d learned the exact same lesson when he’d started at Eastman. The media had *loved* boiling each of the turtles into one defining personality trait. Leo was “the leader”, Donnie was “the brains”, Mikey was “the entertainer”, and Raph was “the angry one”.

Raph hadn’t minded it in the beginning. In fact, he had *liked* that everyone thought he was the toughest of all his brothers. Not only that, but it had been fun and easy at first to lean into that assigned persona during the endless stream of interviews and public appearances. When he was asked an awkward or invasive question, Raph didn’t have to play nice like his brothers. He could get mad and be rude back because it was *expected* of him.

However, it hadn’t taken long for Raph to understand what a double edge sword playing the part of the angry one had become. When they began going to school, he quickly realized that his role as the team’s resident hothead had made him unapproachable to the majority of his classmates. Raph remembered feeling jealous of Donnie declaring that he’d “found his people”, but Raph had made his way onto the wrestling team shortly after. Raph had loved the wrestling itself, of course, but one of the *best* parts of joining was that his teammates automatically became his friends.

Now that Casey had pointed it out, though, it was easy to see that what Raph had with his teammates was extremely superficial. All of the “real shit”, as Casey called it, had always only ever been between Raph and his brothers.

And as much shit as Raph had always given him, it was Leo that had been Raph’s sounding board for most of the “stuff that mattered”. Raph loved Mikey and Donnie, but he’d always felt awkward going

to them with the heavy stuff. Whether it was because of their unofficial "little brother" status or something else Raph couldn't quite see, Leo had always felt like the right brother to talk to when Raph needed an ear.

But Casey didn't have brothers, and by the sound of it, he'd had the same image problem Raph did. Raph had almost wanted to laugh when Casey claimed Raph was the first person who wasn't afraid of him. Why would he be *scared* of Casey?

But you were for a second, Raph had to admit to himself. When Casey had found him in the locker room, Raph *had* felt unsettled. Even now, Raph couldn't put his finger on it, but something had just felt…*off*. The apprehension had been quickly replaced by anger once Casey apologized for talking about Leo, and Raph's initial unease had been forgotten in the aftermath of their pact. Is what Raph felt in that one tense moment what others felt about Casey all the time?

"And like…it's been getting pretty gnarly back home. You guys dealt with some gangs and shit when you were tracking down Superfly, right?" Raph nodded, and Casey continued. "Well, I dunno if you know 'em, but Brooklyn is Purple Dragon territory."

"I've heard of them, but they weren't doing any work for Superfly, so we never had any run-ins with them."

"I mean I ain't surprised," Casey shrugged again. "They're kinda old school, haven't been super active for years, but shit's really picking up again. Good chunk of the dudes in my grade had already joined up."

"Oh, shit," Raph murmured.

"Yeah," Casey nodded. "And I wasn't about to get mixed up in that shit, man. Not when I got an actual shot at going pro. Did you know the minimum wage in the NHL is $750,000 a year? The *minimum fucking wage*, dude! And the legit guys make *millions*. I'm not throwin' away my chance at that just for a buncha worthless punks. I'd told them to fuck off like a billion times, but it got to the point where it was clear they weren't gonna take 'no' for an answer."

"Man, why did they want you to join so bad?"

"Excuse me?" Casey scoffed with mock indignation. "Who *wouldn't* want me on their team?"

Raph rolled his eyes, and Casey threw the Gatorade cap back at him.

"But, y'know, I was getting into too many fights, getting too close to being expelled. If that happened, my coach woulda dropped me from the team. If I lose my spot on a Junior League team, I'm fucked. It was kind of a lose-lose situation, and then…well, then I got hurt, and mom had enough. She moved us here soon as we could."

Raph couldn't stop his eyes from wandering toward the spot where he knew Casey's scar was under his sweatshirt.

"I can tell you wanna ask, but you're trying to be cool," Casey said wryly.

"It's not my business," Raph shrugged awkwardly, looking back out the window. "I didn't really like…get a choice when I got hurt. Everyone knows, and that kinda fucking sucks. You don't have to tell—"

"I got stabbed," Casey interrupted.

"Holy *shit* dude," Raph winced.

"Yup. Wasn't awesome," Casey deadpanned, pulling another box toward himself and ripping off the packing tape. "Punctured my lung. Doctors said it was a fuckin' miracle I didn't die. And like…sure, it wasn't *fun*, but I didn't think it was *that* bad. The whole thing scaring my mom half to death was worse than the actual fuckin' stabbing bit. She was *so* messed up over it."

"Was it a Purple Dragon?"

"Yeah…S'long story, though," Casey shrugged.

"Yeah, I getcha," Raph said. Maybe he didn't want to talk about the event itself, but the aftermath didn't seem to bother him that much. Raph could sympathize. Casey clearly didn't want to talk about how he'd been hurt, or by who. Raph wouldn't ask.

“And I gotta be real with you dude…*you* guys are the reason my mom picked a neighborhood that would put me in the Eastman school district.”

“Wait, what?”

“All that extra security the mayor’s got posted up around the school,” Casey said, making a lazy circling gesture as he spoke. “All those cops and shit keeping an eye out around you guys makes her feel better, I guess.”

Raph liked to pretend it wasn’t a thing, but everyone knew “precautions” had been put in place after Leo was taken. It wasn’t just for Raph and his brothers, either. As accepting as people had been in the beginning, there had been more than a few parents of Raph’s classmates that had raised concerns about their children going to school with “potential future targets”.

But the mayor had reassured both the parents and the administration that Eastman would be kept safe. There was nearly always a cop’s squad car parked nearby the school, and it was hard for Raph to ignore the way-too-obvious plainclothes officers who walked by the school every so often.

Raph wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that *this* was why Casey ended up at Eastman specifically. Casey caught the wrinkle of Raph’s forehead at the mention of the enhanced security.

“Sorry. I guess that’s kinda weird. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“No, it’s cool,” Raph told him. “I dunno, man…I appreciate that you like, tell me shit straight up. People act like I can’t handle anything.”

Casey’s eyebrows twitched at that, and Raph grew suspicious.

“What?”

“I’m not saying you can’t handle anything,” Casey said carefully. “But it *does* kinda seem like you couldn’t handle whatever your brothers said this morning.”

At this, Raph got up out of the computer chair. Setting his now empty Gatorade bottle on the floor, he watched Casey tense up where he sat. Raph didn't blame Casey for thinking he might be getting up to hit him for calling Raph out. Instead, Raph flopped down onto Casey's bed face first.

"Fuuuuuuck," Raph growled in frustration into the mattress. Casey laughed on the floor beside him.

"Yeah, don't think I forgot just cuz you distracted me by getting me to talk about *myself*," Casey teased. "Spill it, dude."

Raph rolled over to look at the ceiling, knowing this would be easier he didn't have to look Casey in the eye.

"They think I don't let myself have fun anymore, and that I'm making myself miserable on purpose. And I guess I'm mad because they're kinda right."

"I get it," Casey finally said after a long moment. "S'kinda hard to just…act like everything is *fine* when it isn't and you're like, the only one who *knows* it isn't."

"Fucking *exactly*!" Raph huffed, tossing his hands up for emphasis. "Anytime I try to do something for fun, I just end up feeling fucking guilty. Cuz like, wherever the fuck Leo is, he *definitely* isn't having a good time, so why should I get to? And I used to say that kinda stuff to Mikey and Donnie, which I *know* was shitty of me because they think he's dead, and people should be allowed to move on when someone dies. But I *know* he's not dead, and they don't fucking get why I can't just, just fucking—argggh!"

"I hear you, dude," Casey interjected. His tone was placating, but not in the frustratingly patronizing way Raph had grown so accustomed to from everyone else. Raph finally turned his head sideways to look over at Casey. He was gazing into the distance with a thoughtful expression.

"But…I dunno," Casey debated. "If you don't do something fun every once in a while, you might go insane for real."

The phrase tickled something far in the back of Raph's mind. Why did that sound familiar? It wasn't…wasn't the *exact* phrase. But what had it been? What had…

"... might go all the way insane if..."

That was it. Or at least *part* of it. Who had said that, though? What was the rest? Might go all the way insane if *what?* Where the *fuck* had Raph heard that?

Casey was saying something, and Raph let the bizarre rush of déjà vu fade away to focus on what Casey was asking.

"What did you do for fun when Leo was around?"

"Fight," Raph said instantly. Casey barked out a laugh.

"I'm *shocked*," Casey gasped, voice dripping with sarcasm. Raph grabbed Casey's pillow and lobbed it at his face. Casey tipped sideways with the force of it, jostling the cheap particle board bookshelf behind him. Raph sat up with a soft "*oh fuck*", but Casey just laughed as it gradually stopped wobbling. He pushed away the box he'd been unpacking and got to his feet, motioning with a jerk of his head for Raph to get up and come with him.

Casey pulled out one of the chairs around the kitchen table for Raph to sit in. Raph took a seat and Casey continued into the kitchen. He rummaged around in the kitchen, finally coming back to the table with a box of cereal, a jug of milk, two bowls, and spoons. It was a little late in the morning for breakfast, but given Raph had puked up whatever was left in his stomach from last night, he wasn't going to complain. Casey plopped down across from Raph and spoke as he poured some cereal and milk.

"Welp, I seem to remember that *someone* still owes me some fighting lessons, since I taught his ugly green mug to skate."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Raph agreed, taking the bowl offered to him by Casey.

"And when you just *happen* to have a little fun, you won't feel guilty about it since you're doing it to pay me back."

“I mean…maybe,” Raph added doubtfully, but Casey shook his head.

“Buddy, I’m not asking. I’m *telling*,” Casey asserted, aggressively pointing his spoon at Raph for emphasis.

Raph couldn’t help but smile as he dipped his own spoon into his breakfast. After all, who was he to argue with *Casey Fuckin’ Jones*?

Chapter End Notes

blaaaahhhh posting this before work gets swamped this weekend

I'm on Twitter at @ThePeakTMNT and Tumblr @the-peak-tmnt just sharing MM fanart and stuff

If you're here because of the incredible comic by Meruz my sister commissioned as a gift, that scene is from an upcoming chapter and I promise we'll get to that soon!

Up next: some bad news from Leo.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: panic attack, **graphic description of an injury**

Shoutout to broomballade for betaing this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph and Casey finished their late breakfast quickly. After clearing the table and depositing their dishes in the sink, Casey nodded toward the sofa in the living room.

“You can like, watch TV or whatever if you want while I keep unpacking,” Casey told Raph. “I’m gonna stay at it for a bit, then maybe you can show me some stuff.”

“How about I help? It’ll go faster.”

“You don’t gotta do that, man,” Casey waved Raph off, but Raph grabbed a box perched precariously on a too-narrow console table near the front door.

“I don’t mind dude. And I dunno…I could use something to do,” Raph mumbled, fingers flexing on the box.

Casey looked as if he wanted to continue arguing for a moment, then shrugged and chuckled a soft “Sure, dude.”

Raph brought the box over to the kitchen table and ripped off the tape to find a pair of women’s shoes, a crock pot, and a jumble of random electronics cords.

“Yeah, now you can see why I haven’t finished this already,” Casey laughed as Raph looked uncertainly at the contents. “It all happened kinda fast, and mom was just throwing whatever in boxes. And like none of these are labeled, so each box is a fun little surprise of random shit.”

“Should I take these to your mom’s room? I don’t wanna like…invade her space,” Raph said, holding the shoes self-consciously. He hadn’t thought of this when he offered to help.

“Oh, yeah I guess that’s kinda awkward. Sorry,” Casey laughed. He dipped into his mom’s room and quickly returned with an empty laundry basket. “You can just chuck anything that looks like it’s hers in here and I’ll take care of it later.”

With the biggest and most awkward hurdle out of the way, the two set to the task of emptying each box and finding a home for whatever was inside. Raph quickly realized that if he picked the heaviest boxes, there was a higher chance of finding kitchen supplies instead of personal items. He felt a little unsure of where to put things, having grown up without a traditional sort of kitchen. Each time Raph asked Casey, however, he seemed just as clueless. Casey insisted more than once that “wherever is fine”, but Raph found himself googling kitchen organization tips anyway.

Raph was unpacking with one hand and scrolling through lists of tips on his phone with the other when a text notification popped up.

Donnie:

Where did you go?

Please come home so we can talk

Casey must have noticed the way Raph's nose wrinkled and asked, "Who's textin' ya?"

"My brother. But he can fuck off," Raph grunted, and Casey snorted in amusement. Raph ignored the text and resumed his task. It was an hour before he received another text, by which point Raph had the kitchen more or less unpacked and organized. He'd just started trying to untangle the rat's nest of random power cords on the living room coffee table when his phone vibrated again.

Mikey:

Raph, I know you're mad at us, but I need you to…

Raph read the text preview on his lockscreen but didn't open it. *Oh, you need something from me? Well tough shit. I needed something from* ***you****,* Raph thought angrily to himself. All he had wanted was to make Mikey feel better, and how did Mikey thank him? By siding with Donnie and doubling down on another half-assed attempt at a fucking pointless *intervention*.

It was only 30 minutes before the next set of texts.

Donnie:

It's cool if you want to blow off some steam or whatever

But don't ignore us

Those two *really* pissed Raph off. Don't ignore them? Why shouldn't he when *Donnie* had ignored Raph? He had asked not once, but *twice* for Donnie to drop it. He had practically begged. But being the insufferable fucking know-it-all that he was, Donnie hadn't given a shit about what Raph had wanted. It was only fair, then, that Raph wouldn't give a shit about what *Donnie* wanted.

Raph didn't even look at the text preview when his phone buzzed about ten minutes later, or any of the countless times after that. Then it started ringing. Raph let it go to voicemail each time with a satisfied smirk.

“Remind me never to piss *you* off,” Casey laughed from the other side of the room as he extracted a collection of dog-eared books from another box.

“They gotta know they’re just being fucking annoying at this point,” Raph groused.

“Y’know, I think we’ve made enough progress to take a break,” Casey mused, surveying the apartment. They had unpacked the majority of the boxes, and only a handful of unsorted piles remained. Raph enjoyed the satisfying feeling of looking at his handiwork.

“And by taking a break, I mean trying to punch each other. But like, *educationally.*”

Raph barked out a laugh. He saw Casey start to scoot the coffee table to make space, but Raph stopped him.

“We’re gonna need more room than this. Where’s the roof access?”

“Oh. Uh, I don’t know. I’ve never looked.”

“Well, I guess that’s ninja lesson number one: always know where all possible exits are. That way you can always have an exit strategy.”

“Yeah? Do exit strategies include inviting yourself over to someone’s place at the ass crack of dawn?”

“I asked to *hang out*. You’re the one who said to come over!”

“Just fuckin’ with you, man. Besides, you helping made that way less of a whole thing,” Casey said, knocking Raph with his shoulder as they made their way out of the apartment and down the hall to the staircase. “But y’know, I figured just *fighting* your way out was the default exit strategy.”

“Ninjitsu’s all about stealth, so like, fighting is kind of a last resort.”

“No disrespect to the whole stealthy ninja thing,” Casey said as they climbed the stairs, “but I think I wanna skip ahead to the ‘last resort’ stuff.”

“Fine by me,” Raph grinned.

Finally up on the chilly roof, Raph began second guessing his agreement to teach Casey martial arts. He knew he was fairly decent at coaching wrestling, and he and his brothers had always helped each other out with moves that the others struggled with, but Raph and his brothers were mutants with ooze-enhanced strength. Casey was just a human. How difficult would it be to pull his punches? Raph had never had a reason to try. If he *could,* would Casey *know* Raph was taking it easy on him? Casey seemed like the kind of guy who would be offended by something like that.

Less than 20 minutes into the lesson, however, Raph knew he had nothing to worry about. Casey was a *beast*. Raph had decided to start by getting a baseline of Casey’s current fighting abilities. Raph explained that they would do a series of self-defense scenarios where Raph would act as the attacker so he could gauge Casey’s reactions. Before they began, Raph had assured Casey that he wouldn’t really hurt him, but that Casey was allowed to be as aggressive as he wanted in defense. Casey seemed to have taken it as a challenge.

“Jesus Christ,” Raph said, rubbing at his left cheek after a particularly good hit from Casey. No matter how Raph came at him, Casey’s response was almost always to come in from Raph’s left to try punching him in the face. “You know you can like, go for literally *any* other part of my body, too, right?”

Casey laughed despite his heavy breathing. Casey’s other preferred tactic seemed to be making himself difficult to catch. Not only was Casey much hardier than he looked, he was *fast.* Raph had seen him rocket around the ice rink when he’d taught Raph to skate, but Raph was surprised to see how quick Casey could be off the ice, too. Raph wouldn’t say it out loud, because he knew the slow turtle jokes would never end, but Casey was a fucking *speed demon*. It was sloppy and unpolished, but Casey darted around Raph well enough to avoid the majority of Raph’s advances. With how fast Casey’s chest was falling and rising, though, Raph made a mental note to explain later how unsustainable Casey’s erratic and hasty movements would be in a real fight.

But as it was, Raph sat down to give Casey a breather and himself a moment to tend to his battered face. He poked at his tender gums as Casey plopped down beside him.

“So,” Casey grinned, chest still heaving. “What’s the prognosis, doc?”

“I mean, now I can see why the Purple Dragons wanted to recruit you. Seriously, not bad dude.”

“Thanks, man. You’re good, though, right?” Casey asked cautiously as Raph massaged his cheek. “I mean, you said I could go all out. And like, I saw you guys get flung around by Superfly and come away in one piece…”

“Yeah, it’s fine dude. Mutants are durable,” Raph assured him. “You could’ve *at least* switched it up and gone for the *right* side of my face once or twice.”

Casey kept grinning as his breathing began to slow. They’d brought a couple bottles of Gatorade with them from under Casey’s desk, and the two sat in comfortable silence for a few moments as they drank.

Raph found himself grinning, too. Casey had been right; Raph *had* ended up having fun, and he *didn’t* feel guilty about it. Not yet, at least. He hadn’t felt guilty about how great yesterday had been, either. He remembered the moment out on the ice with his brothers when he recognized that day was the happiest he’d felt in years. It was *Raph* who should have woken up in a guilt-ridden panic, not Mikey.

What had been different about yesterday? Raph hadn’t needed to give himself permission to have fun. He hadn’t even needed to think about it, it had just happened. Raph knew he couldn’t be truly happy until Leo was back home safe and sound, so why had that overwhelming happiness come so *easily?*

Raph was jarred from his thoughts as Casey loudly crumpled his empty bottle. He got to his feet and turned to look at Raph expectantly. He clapped his hands together, rubbing them eagerly as he asked, “So what’s next, Mr. Miyagi?”

What *was* next? Raph wasn’t stupid. In their text conversation Christmas morning, Casey had called martial arts “sick as fuck.” After what Casey had told him this morning, though, Raph was certain that wasn’t why Casey wanted to learn.

“I mean there’s a bunch of different directions we could take this, but I guess I should ask what you’re hoping to get out of it. This *isn’t* just for fun, right?”

“Man, you *know* it’s not,” Casey chuckled with a sigh. “There’s no point in beating around the fucking bush. If a big ass motherfucker comes at me with somethin’ sharp and pointy, I wanna know how not to end up as a shish kebab again. If one of us has to end up in a hospital, I’d like it to be *him* instead’a *me.*”

Raph debated if he really wanted to know the answer to what he was about to ask.

“So…if I teach you a move to disarm someone who has a knife, are you gonna just keep that in your back pocket in case there’s a next time? Or are you gonna like…go *looking* for a next time?”

Casey didn’t answer immediately. He took off his backwards hat and ran his hand through his unruly hair. Raph was quickly learning that Casey liked to do it when he was thinking. He turned away from Raph to look south towards Brooklyn.

“…I don’t know.”

When Casey turned back to face Raph, it was with that same look of authentic curiosity that so often had Raph revealing more than he meant to.

“What would you do? If you ever found the people who took Leo?”

Raph wasn’t sure how to answer that. He’d never discussed this with anyone, not even Dr. Hart, but Raph had been completely consumed by violent fantasies of revenge for longer than he cared to admit. He’d thought of a hundred different ways he could ruin their lives like they ruined Leo’s. Like they ruined *his*.

But when the time came, would Raph *really* be able to follow through with any of his darker ambitions? Raph loved fighting, but not for the sake of cruelty. The threat of human cruelty had been what led his father to hide his family for 15 years. The cruelty of humans had inspired Superfly’s *own* cruelty, which in turn had nearly wiped out humanity entirely. Leo had led his brothers and cousins in the fight against Superfly, breaking that vicious cycle. Would taking revenge on Leo’s captors just begin it anew?

Wouldn’t they deserve it, though? Raph had always found himself wondering. He still wasn’t sure.

“I guess I don’t really know, either,” Raph answered after a beat.

“Sorry,” Casey said, rubbing awkwardly at the back of his head. “That was kind of a shitty question.”

“You’re fine dude. But…yeah, I guess I don’t blame you for not being sure. I’m not gonna *not* teach you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Yeah, I kinda was,” Casey admitted. “So, is this move just for knives, or like, *all* pointy shit?”

“What do you mean?”

“It uh…wasn’t a knife.”

Raph *had* been wondering. Not that he was an expert, but the clump of scar tissue he’d seen on Casey’s chest looked too irregular and large for a knife wound.

“Yeah, I’ll make sure you know how to avoid *all* pointy shit,” Raph chuckled.

“Good deal. Show me how it’s done, *sensei.*”

“We’ll get there,” Raph assured Casey, only slightly rolling his eyes at the sarcastic title. “That kinda maneuver is like, a combination of smaller moves. We gotta learn those first before we can put ‘em all together. Basics ‘n shit.”

“Yeah, okay,” Casey nodded. “I mean scoring a goal is more than putting a puck in the—"

Casey was interrupted by the buzzing of his phone. He fished it out of his pocket, and Raph watched his eyebrows draw together in confusion as he read a text.

“What the fuck...?” Casey said slowly before looking up at Raph. “Dude, did you give someone my number?”

“What? No, I didn’t.”

“Well someone’s askin’ about you,” Casey said, holding up this phone for Raph to see. Raph read the text and saw red.

212-555-6184

This is Casey Jones, right? Is Raph with you?

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” Raph snarled. “That’s *Donnie’s* number.”

Raph was going to fucking *murder* Donnie. His brothers *knew* how much he fucking hated being tracked. *They* didn’t have to have their every move watched. No, it was only poor, crazy, confused Raph who was being monitored like a fucking tagged animal. It was a small comfort to know that his dad and a handful of federal agents were the only ones with access to that data, but at least Raph had some sliver of privacy left. Privacy that Donnie had just fucking *obliterated.*

“Donnie’s the uh…smart brother, right?” Casey asked cautiously. Raph was so fucking angry that he wouldn’t be surprised if Casey could *feel* the heat radiating off of him.

“If he was *really* smart, he’d know to leave me the fuck *alone*.”

“What should I say? You want me to lie and say you’re not here?”

“No, he already knows where I am,” Raph growled. “Just tell him yes so maybe he’ll fucking drop it.”

“Wait, better idea.”

Casey held his phone out and opened the front-facing camera. Raph realized he was about to take a selfie with Raph in the background as proof. He brought his hands together, pinky-side of each hand touching with knuckles toward the camera, then raised one pinky finger. Casey burst out laughing.

“Oh my fucking god, is that the turtle version of *flipping the bird?*”

“Don’t have enough fingers, so gotta use both hands for the full effect.”

Casey cackled while Raph continued scowling for the camera.

(artwork by @matchstique)



He watched as Casey sent the photo and immediately received a response from Donnie.

“Yeah…uh,” Casey said awkwardly while looking at the text. “Please don’t kill the messenger, but he wants me to tell you that it’s okay if you’re mad, but disappearing and then not answering is *not* okay, and that Mikey is totally freaked out.”

Oh *fuck.*

Raph felt a wave of terrible realization wash over him. His stomach dropped as he reached into his pocket for his own phone, wishing he wasn’t about to find out just how badly he’d fucked up. Raph had thought his brothers’ texts were just more shitty attempts at talking “sense” into him. Now looking at the increasing level of panic in the individual conversations between himself and each brother, Raph understood just how fucking wrong he’d been.

Mikey:

Raph, I know you're mad at us, but I need you to let us know where you are so I can stop worrying

Donnie:

It's cool if you want to blow off some steam or whatever

But don't ignore us

I know you're probably safe and we're overreacting but not hearing from you is kind of scaring us

Mikey:

Dude please please please answer the phone

Raph please let me know you're okay

PLEASE Raph

Donnie:

If you don't answer soon, I'm going to steal dad's phone so I can see where you are

I know his password to the app they gave him that can see your tracker

We're both freaked out but Mikey is REALLY freaking out and I don't know what else to do

I have dad's phone now

I know this isn't okay

I won't do this if you just answer us

Don't make me do this dude

Please don't hate me for this

Raph wanted to crawl into a hole and *die*. How could he have been this fucking stupid? Donnie and Mikey had already watched one big brother walk away only to never come back. Raph knew he wasn't as important as Leo and that he never would be, but walking out on Donnie and Mikey this morning and not answering had probably dredged up so many terrible feelings from Leo's disappearance. Raph thought about how he would feel if their roles were reversed, and just the idea of Donnie or Mikey being radio silent after leaving like he had made Raph's heart race.

Anger quickly being replaced by shame and panic, Raph typed out a hasty, pitifully inadequate text to Donnie.

Raph:

I'm fine. I was angry and I didn't even think about you guys being worried. I should have answered earlier. I'm sorry.

Donnie:

I want to say it's fine, but it's not

We don't need another brother disappearing

Don't fucking scare us like that dude

Mikey might actually kill you

Raph:

Sorry

Is he okay now?

Donnie:

Not really

Will you please come home now?

Raph:

Yeah, okay. I'll head out now

Raph hesitated a moment before sending the next text. He didn't want to, but after how majorly he'd fucked up, it felt like the right thing to do.

Raph:

You can watch my tracker while I walk home

Donnie:

Thank you

I'm gonna wait topside at Marty's for you

"I'm sorry man, I uh, I better get home," Raph told Casey awkwardly. "We can pick this up again later."

"It's cool, I get it. My mom's still pretty touchy after this whole thing," Casey said while vaguely gesturing at his chest. He started making his way toward the roof access door, and Raph followed. "You shoulda heard the shitstorm I came home to a couple weeks ago when I forgot I had my phone

on silent. Surprised we didn't get a fuckin' noise complaint after that. But like…I know she wasn't really *mad*. Just scared, y'know? Best to just like, get it over with."

Casey laughed as Raph ran a hand over his face and groaned. They parted ways in the staircase, Casey stopping on his floor and Raph continuing down to the lobby.

Raph didn't outright run, but he headed toward their designated meeting spot as quickly as possible. Marty's was the bodega closest to their favorite manhole access to the Lair. It wasn't really named Marty's, but the words printed on the corner store's old fabric awning were so faded and illegible that everyone in the neighborhood had defaulted to calling it by the name of the store's owner. He was an ever-present fixture of the store, never seeming to leave other than to chat with regulars on the stoop. That was exactly where Raph found him today, standing with arms akimbo speaking with a nervous looking Donnie.

"Raphael!" Marty boomed. His voice was about as big as the man himself, and Raph felt sorry for the residents of the apartments above. "Donatello here shows up and I say '*Donatello, where is my **favorite** turtle?*' and Donatello tells me that Michelangelo's not feeling well. And then I say '*Donatello, where is my **least** favorite turtle?*' and Donatello says '*Raphael is hanging out with a friend*'. Then I ask Donatello '*why is my least favorite turtle out being a delinquent somewhere when Michelangelo, who again I remind you is my **favorite** turtle, is home not feeling well? Why isn't Raphael out getting medicine and treats from Marty for his little brother?'* And do you know what Donatello tells me?"

"What does he tell you, Marty?" Raph deadpanned with a dramatic roll of his eyes. Each knew the other wasn't *actually* mad, and that Raph wasn't genuinely Marty's least favorite of the turtle brothers. This was just part of Marty's routine, riling up his regulars and assigning them varying levels of favoritism that changed more often than the weather. Raph had been the favorite last week for bringing Marty some of Scumbug's fudge and walnut brownies, while Mikey had been the least favorite for accidentally knocking a jar of pickles off the shelf with his shell. With how often he helped Marty troubleshoot issues with the store's ancient cash register and security system, Donnie was the most frequent holder of the 'favorite turtle' title.

"He tells me '*Raphael didn't know Michelangelo doesn't feel well, but he's on his way home now'*, and I say '*Well then, maybe Raphael isn't such a bad brother, rushing home to care for his baby brother now that he knows*.'"

The sarcastic retort Raph had been prepared to shoot back died in his throat. Donnie had clearly lied to Marty about why Mikey was still home, and there was no way he would have told Marty what Raph had done. Raph wanted to argue that he *was* a bad brother, and that backhanded as it was, he didn't deserve Marty's praise. Raph's jaw seemed to have locked shut, though.

Marty didn't even notice Raph's sudden inability to speak, because he'd turned and walked back into the store. Raph caught Donnie's eyes for a split second before his brother quickly looked away. Raph tried to school his face and pull himself back together as Marty reemerged, a bottle of cough medicine in one hand and three saran wrapped cookies in the other. He deposited them in Raph's hands, his own returning to his hips and a satisfied grin splitting his face.

"I don't have my wallet," Raph said, confused. Marty put his enormous hands on Raph's shoulders, physically turning him in the opposite direction. He shoved Raph gently away from the store as he laughed.

"Pah," Marty scoffed jovially behind Raph. "My favorite turtle can have this one on the house." Raph wasn't sure if he was talking about Mikey, or if his preference had changed once again to favor Raph. Raph didn't ask, instead throwing a hand up in thanks as he continued toward home, Donnie catching up beside him silently.

Neither said a word as they approached the manhole cover. Donnie crouched down to open it and climb through first. Raph shoved the cookies and the unnecessary bottle of cough medicine into the pocket of his hoodie before climbing in after his brother. The moment Raph's feet touched the sewer floor, he was tackled with what had to be the single most aggressive hug Donnie had ever given him.

"Don't you *ever* fucking do that again," Donnie hissed into Raph's shoulder.

"Okay," was all Raph could say. He let Donnie hang on for as long as he wanted, hating himself a little more with every passing moment he spent feeling Donnie shuddering against him. After a while, Donnie squeezed Raph tightly before finally letting go.

"Jesus *Christ*, Raph," Donnie sighed with a horrible, unhappy grimace. It made Raph wince.

"I'm sorry," he said lamely.

"Okay," Donnie answered. He let out an enormous, shaky sigh before closing his eyes and bringing a hand up to massage his forehead. "Yeah, okay, okay. Everything's cool. I mean it's *not*, but you're coming home and you're okay, and that's what matters, so it would be awesome if I could stop *freaking the fuck out now*."

Raph saw Donnie's fingers flex painfully into his forehead, knuckles nearly white, and Raph *had* to make him stop. He moved in close to grip Donnie's wrist gently and slowly pulled it away. Donnie opened his eyes to look at Raph in surprise, and Raph's heart sank to see the tears that had begun to pool at the corner of Donnie's eyes.

"I'm okay, Donnie," Raph said softly. He raised his other hand to rest it on Donnie's shoulder. "I'm okay."

"You're o-okay," Donnie stammered, eyes wide and watery behind thick lenses.

"I'm coming home," Raph affirmed. He squeezed Donnie's shoulder.

"You're—" Donnie swallowed hard. "You're coming *home.*"

Raph knew he deserved to never see the light of day again for being the one to bring Donnie to this point, but Raph could hate himself later. Right now, Donnie needed him. Still holding onto Donnie's shoulder and wrist, Raph took an exaggerated breath, then another. Incredible, talented, genius little brother that he was, Donnie caught on after only a few of Raph's large inhales and long exhales. He began matching Raph's pace, each breath becoming steadier than the last, until finally Raph felt Donnie stop trembling in his grip. Raph pulled him in once more for another hug, now *his* turn to squeeze his brother tightly.

"Sorry," Donnie mumbled against him.

"Nope," Raph declared, pulling away and holding Donnie out to look him in the eye. "Not allowed to be sorry about this."

"Is that so?" Donnie asked with a weak but playfully skeptical look as he pried himself out of Raph's grip.

"It is. As not only the oldest, but also the most fucked up, I get to make the rules about this stuff."

"...you know I didn't really mean that, right?"

“I do,” Raph told him. “You were mad and you were hurt, so you were trying to hurt me back. Which is exactly what I fucking did to you guys today. I’m sorry.”

Donnie had shoved his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie. He looked down the sewer tunnel in the direction of the Lair, letting out a humorous little puff of air with a smile. There was an old plastic milk crate on the sewer floor, and Donnie took a seat. He kicked absently at some other litter while Raph crossed his arms and leaned against the sewer wall. Donnie had been anxious for Raph to come home, but it seemed he wanted to have this conversation out of earshot from any of the others.

“You were right,” he said softly, shaking his head a little.

“I mean, I know I was,” Raph laughed. “But about what specifically?”

“Yesterday, when I came to check on you in your room and you said that we might still mess things up sometimes. Well, I *really* messed up. I know I’m not supposed to push you, but I did anyway because I’m a fucking idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot, Donnie,” Raph sighed flatly. “You’re a fucking genius, and you like to fix things, and you’re really, *really* fucking good at it.”

He didn’t want to start another argument, not with emotions already running so high, but Raph *had* to get Donnie to understand this. Raph sighed.

“But I need you to stop trying to fix *me*.”

Donnie’s shoulders slumped. As frustrated as Raph was, he couldn’t help but feel sorry for Donnie, whose drive to make things work bordered on the obsessive. It was almost certainly driving him insane that he couldn’t fix his brother. There was nothing Raph could do about it, though. There was nothing *to* fix.

“I know, *I know*. It’s just…” Donnie trailed off, putting his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands. From behind his palms, Donnie mumbled “I got in.”

“Holy shit,” Raph exclaimed softly. Without any sort of real mailbox or mail slot for the Lair, the mutants had a rented PO box at the nearest post office. He knew Donnie had been compulsively checking it for letters from all the colleges he had applied to, because a growing collection of letters for Raph had been accumulating on his own desk. Raph *had* sent out a few applications himself, but only to pacify everyone else. None of them needed to know about his real plan to search for Leo after graduation, and it would have been obvious if he had not been applying anywhere. Raph kept shoving the unopened letters into a desk drawer.

But Raph could still be excited for his brother. He knew how much this meant to Donnie, so he grinned as he asked “Where did you get in?”

“*Everywhere,*” Donnie said, finally looking up at Raph with a nervous smile. “So far, at least. There’s still a few I haven’t heard back from.”

“Dude, that’s fucking *great!*” Raph beamed. He had been confident Donnie would get in anywhere he applied to, but was still a huge relief to know for sure. “Seriously, congrats Donnie. That’s *amazing*. What did Dad say?”

“I haven’t told him. I haven’t told anyone but you and Mikey.”

“What?” Raph startled. “Why *not?*”

“Because…I’m afraid to leave.”

Raph wasn’t sure how much more his heart could take today, but he figured he deserved this.

“Mikey and I have been talking about it, like, a lot lately,” Donnie admitted. “Just…when things started to get better, I think it made us both realize how much harder it’s gonna be if we all go somewhere different. He’s already gotten accepted by half the film schools in California–”

“That’s great, though!”

“It’s on the other side of the fucking country!” Donnie retorted. “And you were talking about moving on and living our lives this morning and just…I know it’s not the same, but…it’s already so fucking

hard without Leo."

"You're right, it's *not* the same," Raph argued gently. It was hard to keep his voice steady with heart breaking for Donnie. "You'll still be able to call and text us, we'll still do summer break and holidays and everything–"

"Will we?" Donnie shot back nervously. "I *swear* I'm not trying to make you feel bad or guilty or anything, but I'm…I'm not just afraid of us all being in different places. I'm afraid for *you*."

The shock and confusion Raph felt at that statement must have been all over his face, because Donnie rushed to continue.

"I'm so fucking scared of what's gonna happen if Mikey and I leave you like…like *this*. And I know that you're working on it with Dr. Hart, and that you just...you just need *time*. We haven't told dad, but both of us are ready to defer enrollment to…y'know, to *give* you more time. We just *can't* leave you like this, Raph."

Fuck.

For years, Raph's plan after graduation had simply been to just leave once Donnie and Mikey went off to college. He had been so sure that nobody would care. In fact, he had imagined they would be *glad* to be rid of him. But that had been *before*: before Donnie and Mikey started being his brothers again, before he realized his dad still loved him, before he met Casey and finally knew what having a best friend was like, before he no longer thought of himself as *alone*. And now he didn't just *think* he wasn't alone, he *knew*. Donnie and Mikey were here for him. They were going to *stay* here for him.

What the fuck was Raph going to do? He *had* to go look for Leo once his tracker was out. If Leo was able to escape on his own, it surely would have happened by now. Raph was the only person who believed Leo was alive. He was Leo's *only* hope.

But Donnie and Mikey…they needed him so much more than Raph had ever imagined they would. They *cared* about him more than he thought was ever possible again. How would they take it when he finally left for his mission, *especially* if they deferred enrollment just to stay with him? If what happened today was any indication, the answer was *not fucking well*.

Raph would have to choose, and he already knew that choice would have to be Leo. Donnie and Mikey weren't okay, but they *were* safe and free. For all Raph knew, Leo could have been getting milked or having any number of terrible things done to him at that *very* moment. If Raph didn't force himself not to think about it every single day for the past two years, he really *would* be insane.

Raph may have been certain of what he had to do, but that didn't make it any easier. Knowing that one day very soon he have to walk out on his brothers, his brothers that he'd *just* gotten back, his little brothers who *needed* him, who were so scared to lose him they were ready to sacrifice their *own futures–*

Raph felt the tendrils of the hazy abyss begin to creep out from the darkest corner of his mind. This was too…too much. *Too much. Too fucking much.*

I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this.

"***No***," Raph growled, loud and aggressive, surprising both himself and Donnie. Raph wouldn't let this happen. Not right now. Someday he would have to leave Donnie and Mikey, but *not right now*. He needed to *be here now*. Be here ***right fucking now***.

Raph let his shell drag against the grimy brick of the sewer wall as he brought himself to the floor, not caring what it did to the back of his jacket. He forced his trembling legs to cross, braced his hands on his knees, and put every ounce of willpower he possessed into staying present.

He was in the sewer. *Breathe in for four*. Donnie was here. *Hold it for seven*. The floor was damp. *Breathe out for eight*. The sound of dripping. *In for four.* The smell of the cookies in his pocket. *Hold for seven.* Donnie was here. *Out for eight.* The soreness in his cheek from Casey's punches. *In for four*. Donnie was here. *Hold for seven*. The fabric of his sweatpants under his fingertips. *Out for eight*. Donnie was right fucking here. *Four. Seven. Eight. Four. Seven. Eight. Four. Seven. Eight.*

Raph was here.

"Raph? A-are you okay?"

"I'm gonna be," Raph answered, stilted.

"Raph, I'm–I'm so fucking sorry, I didn't mean to do that to you again, fuck fuck *fuck*. Why do I just keep setting you off? What's *wrong* with me?!"

"*Stop talking*," Raph grunted. He loved Donnie, but he needed him to *stop*. Of all things, why did he have to say *that?* Raph was dragged back to that morning, waking up and nearly ruining Leo's book, wondering *what the fuck is wrong with me*?

Nope nope nope. Here. Be here.

Raph's eyes reconnected to his brain, and he could suddenly see Donnie's pained expression. His Adam's apple bobbed as he restrained himself from speaking, not at all a skill Donnie was known for. Raph had to act quickly.

"Donnie, I really, *really* need you to listen to me this time, okay? I didn't tell you guys earlier, but I… I woke up kind of…kind of *freaking out*. And it was…really, *really* bad. And then the Mikey thing happened, and us arguing, and…and *everything else*, and I promise we'll talk about this stuff, but I just…*can't* right now. I'm sorry, but I think I'm…at my fucking limit for today."

"Okay," Donnie said, voice unsteady, eyes wide and glossy. "Yeah, okay, I'm sorry. We'll figure it out later. Let's…let's just go home."

"Just…give me a minute," Raph croaked. He continued breathing, trying to regain control over his legs so he could stand up. He saw Donnie hovering awkwardly in his peripheral, shifting his weight from one foot to the other with his phone in his hands. Raph was sure it was Mikey that Donnie was texting with lightning-fast thumbs.

God, he still had to go apologize to Mikey. Raph was *beat*. This day seemed to have lasted for weeks, and it wasn't even dinnertime yet. He owed it to Mikey to give him a proper apology, though…*and* a hug. In fact, he wanted to give Donnie another hug, too. The idea was the final burst of motivation Raph needed to get his legs under him and stand.

"You good?" Donnie asked warily.

"Yeah. C'mere."

Raph gripped a handful of the fabric of Donnie's jacket to reel him in for yet another hug. Raph's heart nearly burst when Donnie let out a soft, startled giggle and hugged back.

"Whoa, man," Donnie chuckled against him. "When did you turn into such a hugger?"

"Making up for lost time, I guess," Raph said with a squeeze. "I got like a two year deficit on these."

That made Donnie squeeze back. They broke away, and the two began their way towards the Lair.

"How's Mikey?"

"I really do think he might actually kill you," Donnie said nervously beside Raph. "He uh…couldn't stop crying until we got that photo from your friend. Now he's like…just really, *really* pissed."

"Fuck," Raph hissed. "Sorry about the photo. I was mad about…y'know, how you figured out where I was and—wait, how *did* you get Casey's number?"

"School records," Donnie murmured. "Once I figured out what address you were at, just had to cross-reference it with all the student addresses. You think with how much physical security the city has around Eastman, they would've beefed up the cybersecurity, too."

Raph huffed in response. He was trying so, *so* hard not to be angry at Donnie about it, but he still felt violated in a way.

“Oh, boys,” Splinter startled in his chair when they entered. “I thought you were in one of your rooms watching movies again. I did not want to interrupt, but have you seen my phone?”

“Did you look under your chair?” Donnie said, kneeling down behind Splinter’s recliner for a moment, and Raph rolled his eyes as he saw Donnie take it out of his pocket. He stood back up to hand Splinter the phone. “Yeah, looks like it slipped through between the seat and armrest.”

“Ah, thank you Donnie. Where were you boys?”

“Raph was at a friend’s, then we met up at Marty’s,” Donnie answered smoothly while Raph dipped into the kitchen.

“A friend’s?” Splinter asked, clearly surprised.

“Yeah, new kid at school. He uh, moved here from Brooklyn,” Raph told him as he poured himself a glass of water. This whole “having normal conversations with dad again” thing was still new and awkward, and it helped to have a task to busy himself with whenever it happened.

“You look tired,” Splinter mused.

Raph was *not* about to tell his dad what had happened today, and from the way Donnie shifted awkwardly beside Splinter, he wasn’t going to either.

“He asked for some, uh…self-defense tips. So we sparred on the roof a bit. I didn’t…sleep well, so I guess after that I’m just, y’know…worn out.”

“I see,” Splinter mused. “Very nice of you to help a friend. You deserve a rest. A nap, maybe?”

“Yeah, that uh, that sounds kinda nice actually. I’ll…see you later.”

The jitters Raph usually felt after successfully talking with his dad hadn't settled by the time he made it to Mikey's door. God, he really *was* tired. That nap really did sound pretty fucking good, but he had to do this. He rapped his knuckles on Mikey's door and waited.

"Mikey?" Raph called through the closed door. "I'm home."

"*Congratulations*," came Mikey's response, dripping with more sarcasm than Raph had thought Mikey was even capable of.

"Mike, I'm so sorr—"

"I don't *care*," Mikey interrupted from the other side.

Raph winced. Fuck, Donnie was right; Mikey was *pissed*. Raph tried again.

"Please, Mikey, just—"

Raph's plea was cut short by the door being wrenched open in front of him, revealing a *furious* Mikey. Jesus, had Raph ever seen Mikey *this* angry before? Even though it looked like he would clobber Raph right in the face for trying, Raph *desperately* wanted to hug Mikey. He knew it wouldn't be welcome, but it was all Raph could even *think* about. His little brother was *right there*. He needed Mikey to know how much he loved him, how sorry he was, how he could never forgive himself for leaving him like that, leaving him without a goodbye, without *one last hug*. But he could now, just *one more*, *one last hug*, then he could let go, he could *stop*, he could—

"*I. Don't. Care*." Mikey snarled, shoving Raph away and out of the strange static that had just engulfed his brain. "Just *go away*."

Mikey slammed the door shut, leaving Raph in the hall.

Alone.

It was the final straw. Raph closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath that he wanted to pretend wasn't a whimper. He felt a bone-deep exhaustion overtake him, feeling heavier and heavier with each step toward his room.

Finally on the other side of his own door, he shrugged off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. He groped sluggishly for the cookies and medicine in his hoodie pocket, depositing them on his desk on top of what he realized was another unopened letter from a college. Raph ignored it. Just like he ignored the waste basket of puke from this morning still under his desk, or the way his plastron ached where Mikey had put his hands on him to shove, or the terrible, gaping hole in his chest that had nothing to do with the bullet that had ripped through him years ago.

Raph had to shut it all out. Shut it out like he'd been shut out by Mikey. He crawled into bed. He didn't deserve to rest like his dad had said, but Raph couldn't fight it a second longer. Alone in his room, he slipped away.

Raph had only been aware that he was back in the dream room for a moment before Leo was crashing into him. Raph felt Leo's fingers scrabble for purchase at the back of his shell, his face mashed into Raph's shoulder. Raph was tired, but not tired enough that he couldn't stand here and let Leo lean on him. He would *never* be too tired for that.

(artwork by @_Burger_sauce_)



“*I’m so sorry*,” Leo gasped into Raph.

“Whoa, Leo,” Raph said, drinking in the contact before peeling his brother off to look at him. Leo’s wild eyes were full of tears.

“Raph, I didn’t mean to do that to you, I *swear*. I’m so, *so* sorry,” Leo pleaded. Raph kept a firm grip on Leo’s upper arms, feeling his brother swaying where he stood. It seemed to have taken everything Leo had to stand long enough to hug Raph, and Raph could feel through their connection that Leo’s legs would not hold him up much longer. He guided them both to the floor, Leo nearly crumpling as they went. Raph folded his legs underneath himself a little more gracefully as he helped Leo situate himself.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Raph told Leo honestly. “But it’s okay.”

“*It’s not,*” Leo said wetly, and Raph suddenly understood. Mikey had said *exactly* that this morning, in *exactly* the same tone.

“It—it was *you*! You were Mikey!”

Raph could *see it* now. Mikey had cried in the same terrible, violent way Leo was now. Raph had pried Mikey's hand from the edge of his plastron where he gripped it in the same desperate way Leo so often did here. Now, Raph realized the moment that Mikey had spasmed in his arms had been Leo relinquishing control. *That* was why Mikey had been so confused; he didn't know what he was sorry for because it hadn't even been *him* apologizing.

"W-wasn't just Mikey," Leo said with a hand over his face. Leo didn't have to explain what he meant. The connection between them betrayed Leo's thoughts to Raph.

It had been Leo, not Raph, who had tried to destroy the book.

Raph was overcome with relief at the revelation that it hadn't been *him*, but it was short lived. Leo's sobs renewed as he buried his face in his hands, his entire body heaving with the force of them. Raph tried to steady his brother, placing his hands on Leo's shoulders while his mind reeled. Brief as it may have been that morning, Raph's body, Raph's consciousness, Raph's *thoughts* had been both his *and* Leo's.

Raph silently berated himself. It should have been *obvious*. Raph had taken over for Leo last night, after all. He had controlled Leo's breathing for him, felt both sets of their lungs simultaneously, sensed Leo's emotions as clearly as his own. But that had been *here*, here in this strange place that Raph still didn't quite understand. Raph didn't even know *how* he had done it.

What *was* clear, however, was that Leo's mastery over this connection far exceeded Raph's. Raph had only done it once, only in this room, and only when Leo had allowed him to. Leo had done it to Raph not just in the real world, but without his permission or knowledge.

Before Raph could even begin to wonder if it had happened ever before, he knew that it had. *"I'm really starting to get pretty good at this. I even knocked on dad's door for you earlier."* Leo had told him that *weeks* ago.

How many times had it happened? Raph remembered Leo's request for Raph to watch a wider variety of entertainment, and felt his own pulse begin to quicken. Was…was Leo *always* there? Leo could hear Raph's thoughts here in the dream room, but could he hear them *all* the time? There was so much that Raph thought had been private, so many things Raph would be mortified for Leo to have seen, heard, or felt. His conversations with Dr. Hart, his darker thoughts at his worst, his lowest moment when he'd actually *blamed* Leo—

The room seemed to flicker around them, like an old lightbulb fighting to stay illuminated.

“No, *no*,” Leo gasped, finally dropping his hands to look Raph in the eye. “It’s not—I don’t—it’s not the s-same as in here, I *s-swear*.”

It was all Raph could do not to panic. He had to trust Leo, even though he should be angry. He should feel as upset as he was over Donnie tracking him. *Worse*, even, given that taking over his body and mind was a far, *far* deeper violation of Raph’s privacy and autonomy.

“I know, I know, *I know*,” Leo moaned, eyes screwed shut, shaking his head furiously. “I’m so fucking sorry, Raph. I’m…I’ve been…so *selfish*. So *fucking selfish!”*

Raph felt venomous waves of self-loathing radiating from Leo, and Raph had to keep himself from physically shaking his brother out of it.

“Stop, *stop*, Leo!”

“I hurt you. I *scared* you.”

“It…it *did* scare me,” Raph told him. There was no point in lying here. “I was so scared that I wanted to ruin something I knew you loved.”

“I *hate* that stupid fucking book,” Leo hissed aggressively. Suddenly, Leo was on his feet again. Raph stood to watch Leo pace in small, tight circles as he continued. “I wasn’t…I wasn’t *trying* to unlock this. I didn’t even know we had this! I *swear* I didn’t know! I-I thought…I thought meditation would *help*. I just wanted…wanted to *fix this.”*

Leo clawed at his plastron. Raph didn’t even need the link between them to understand what Leo meant, because it was in him, too. It lived there in his chest, wedged between his lungs, coiled around his heart. Raph could feel it there nearly every moment of every day. It lay there in wait, poised to strike, ready to consume him, ready to suffocate and shake him apart whenever he faltered.

“I thought if I…if I could just get rid of this, I could be *better*. A better leader. A…a better *brother*. I was just so…so scared. All the time.”

Leo broke off to shake his head once more.

"I understand, Leo," Raph told him.

"I wish you *didn't*. You were never like this before," Leo said desperately. "It's my fault. I…I've fucking *infected* you with this."

"I…won't lie, I definitely don't love the anxiety," Raph said, his pitiful attempt at a joke falling flat. "But it's *okay,* Leo."

"None of this is okay!" roared Leo. "All I ever fucking do is hurt you! And it's not…not just this. I've *always* hurt you. Your tooth, your plastron—"

"You didn't do this," Raph interjected, touching the damaged plastron scute on his right side.

"No, *that* one." Leo's eyes were on the X shaped scar on Raph's left. Raph almost wanted to laugh.

"We were kids! It was just a training accident. I don't care about this one. I don't care about *any* of it."

"You should," Leo scolded. "You cared enough that you were hurting Donnie and Mikey that you did something…something that was hard for you."

"What are you talking about, Leo?"

"Donnie was right. This…this really can't go on forever. And you don't want to choose between me and them. So…I'm choosing for you."

"Leo…what—" Raph couldn't finish, couldn't speak, couldn't brace himself for what he suddenly knew was coming.

"I have to shut you out. I have to end this."

"*You can't*," Raph agonized. His hands found Leo's shoulders once more. This time Raph *did* shake him. "You can't, *you can't*."

"I have to," Leo whispered. "I have to make this stop. I'm ruining your life. I'm ruining *you.*"

"You're not, I fucking swear Leo, you're not. But this…this *will* ruin me. I can't fucking lose you."

"You'll move on," Leo said flatly. "Everyone else did."

"*Please*, Leo, please don't do this," Raph begged.

"I'm holding you back. And that's holding *them* back."

"I'll make them go," Raph pleaded. "I'll figure something out Leo. I'll…I'll lie if I have to. I'll do whatever it takes—"

"AND SO WILL I! I'll do *whatever* it fucking takes!*"* Leo bellowed, throwing Raph's hands off. His shoulders were drawn up, his hands clenched into fists, a terrible snarl plastered on his face. Raph could have been looking in a mirror.

"It's me," Raph realized. The anger and the cursing…they weren't Leo's. They were *his*. "You're like this because of *me*."

"Trust me, *I* got the better end of the deal," Leo said darkly, looking at Raph's chest as if he could physically see the anxiety that had taken up residence within it.

"No, you didn't," Raph objected. "Leo…if you let it control you, it…it can ruin your life."

"There's not much left to ruin."

“Don’t fucking say that,” Raph said desperately. “Leo, this…this kind of anger, it makes you say stupid shit you don’t mean, like I did with dad and—and Donnie and Mikey and *everyone.* You’ll make the stupidest fucking choices because you’re just—just so fucking *mad* you can’t even think straight. And this? *This* is a stupid choice, Leo!”

“*Don’t call me stupid*,” Leo growled wildly, rounding on Raph. His voice had gone low and rough. It wasn’t anything like that cringey, raspy voice he’d used to do when giving them mission instructions. This was real. This was dark. This was *dangerous*. “I’m not *stupid.* I’m not *dumb.* I’m not a ***dumb animal.”***

Raph knew his own anger. He understood it more intimately than he wished to. He had *needed* to in order to conquer it. *This* was not his. This was something worse. Something far more terrifying. Leo’s nostrils were flared, his teeth clenched in a ferocious snarl, body tensed as if ready to strike. Leo’s pupils were two tiny pinpricks of concentrated, deadly intent. Raph had rarely felt like an animal himself, but he did now. He felt like *prey*.

“You’re not. You’re not dumb, and you’re not an animal, Leo,” Raph said quickly and emphatically despite the wild, threatening look in Leo’s eyes. “Leo…what are they *doing* to you?”

Leo froze, and Raph watched as Leo seemed to come back to himself in an instant. His face crumpled before burying it in his hands once more. He whispered from behind his hands.

“*I’m so sorry.*”

“Why is this happening, Leo? Please just…just tell me what’s going on.”

“They want this,” Leo said, and Raph understood that he meant the connection. “They want to control it. If I stop this, if you’re gone, if you and Mikey and Donnie are gone, if they don’t know you all have it too…then I can give it to them. And then…then maybe they’ll give me what *I* want.”

“What do you want?”

“To be a good brother. That’s all I want. All I’ve ever wanted. I want to protect my brothers. All of them.”

“I know you think you’re doing the right thing, I know you do,” Raph pleaded. “But please, *please* don’t do this, Leo.”

“I’m sorry, Raph,” Leo said with a sad, soft smile. He came in for a hug. Raph wanted to fight it, wanted to deny Leo just as Mikey had. Maybe then he wouldn’t do this. Maybe Raph could stop this. He hadn’t been able to the first time, he couldn’t let it happen a second.

But Raph was frozen, paralyzed by the fear of losing this connection, of losing Leo. He couldn’t even speak as Leo’s arms wrapped around him. Raph hoped that Leo could feel his desperate refusal to accept this through the link. He hoped Leo could feel it just as clearly as *he* could feel Leo’s sadness, his regret, his fear, his shame and anger and *love love love—*

Then, Raph felt nothing.

He was dying. That had to be what this was. There had never been anything worse than this. Not even the gaping crater in his chest, fragments of his own plastron littering the pavement beneath him, more blood than he thought his body could hold pooling at his hands and knees—not even *that* had felt this devastatingly fatal.

Raph could not breathe. Something was gone. *Something was gone.* Maybe it was his lungs, because he could not fill them. He could not draw in a single breath. His body burned. His mind swam through the void, searching, reaching, finding nothing, falling, *falling—*

Raph’s body hit the floor beside his bed, the impact forcing a violent, shuddering gasp of air. Instincts took over, his body taking in desperate wheezing breaths as he shivered uncontrollably on the floor. One leg was still tangled in his sheets, and he wrenched it free after several uncoordinated attempts. He scrambled to sit up, shell resting against the side of his bed, panting as he shook.

Raph looked around wildly, realizing that he was alone. He was alone. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t be alone. *He shut me out. He shut me out.*

Unsteady as it was, Raph was on his feet. His trembling hand somehow managed to turn the doorknob of his bedroom door, and he was in the hall. Thoughts still frantic and unclear, it was a moment before he realized he had made it to his destination.

"M-Mikey," Raph sniffled as he gripped the knob on Mikey's door. He could not find the strength to turn it. He let his head tip forward to rest on the door with a pitiful *thunk*. "Mikey, *please.*"

There was the muffled sound of movement behind the door. Raph wasn't sure if it was real, or just his frenzied mind playing tricks on him. It didn't matter. He was going to beg either way.

"I'm sorry," Raph cried. "I'm *sorry*, please don't s-shut me out, plea—"

The door opened, and Raph pitched forward to clutch his little brother desperately to his aching chest. He felt Mikey startle in his grasp, surprised by the intensity of the embrace, but Raph couldn't bring himself to loosen his hold. He *needed* this. He needed his brother as surely as he needed breathing.

"I'm sorry, *I'm sorry*, please don't leave me," Raph sobbed hysterically. "*Don't leave me.*"

"I—" Mikey stammered in Raph's crushing hold. "I'm not—I'm not leaving you, Raph."

The affirmation only made Raph cry harder. He didn't register the journey to Mikey's bed where he now sat, or the appearance of Donnie in Mikey's room, or when both of his brothers had taken a seat on either side of him, muttering assurances that they loved him, they weren't leaving him, that he wasn't *alone*.

Raph could only keep crying, knowing they were wrong.

Chapter End Notes

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Parody art by @Cheezthatboii Twitter
- Art by @KazooLoozer Twitter
- Comic by @SashimewTheCat Tumblr | Twitter
- Art by @_Burger_sauce_ Twitter
- Art by @kuch1_k0pi Tumblr | Twitter

Chapter 14: Did You Know There's a Game Boy That Still Works After Being Halfway Melted in the Gulf War?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Like so many times before, Raph's return to the waking world was sudden and violent. He stared into the darkness of the room as he tried and failed to bring his breath into a steadier pace. Unlike Mikey, Raph remembered his nightmares, but last night had been nightmare free.

While his mind was sure of this, his body seemed to strongly disagree. His heart was pounding behind his battered plastron, and he felt his throat constrict under some invisible pressure. He *knew* he hadn't had a nightmare, so why was this happening? He felt tense in a way that usually signified an approaching panic attack, and Raph couldn't stop a frustrated whine from forming in his throat.

Fear spiked even higher as Raph sensed something—some*one*—beside him. Right as he was about to bolt upright in panic, Raph's eyes adjusted to the darkness just enough to make out the form of a sleeping Mikey. Despite his still rattled nerves, Raph let out a relieved puff of air.

When they were kids, sometimes Raph would wake up to his little brother climbing down from the bunk above him to worm his way under Raph's covers after he had a nightmare. It had been a long,

long time since Mikey had done something like this, but he *had* just had a terrible nightmare the night before. But why didn't Raph remember Mikey coming to his room?

Oh, fuck. Maybe that was because they weren't *in* Raph's room. This was Mikey's room, Mikey's *bed.* Raph's stomach lurched as the pieces of what had happened began falling into place. Raph felt his face burn in shame over the memory of how he had ended up here. *Fuck fuck fuuuuck!* Had he really cried himself to sleep in Mikey's bed?

Mustering every bit of ninja stealth he could in this anxious state, Raph carefully extracted himself from the blanket that either Mikey or Donnie must have thrown over him. Mikey didn't stir, and Raph quickly crept out of his room and into the hall.

He didn't know what time it was. In his earlier panic, Raph hadn't brought his phone with him to Mikey's room. The lights in the tunnel hallway were off, but as Raph made his way to his own bedroom, he could see light spilling into the mouth of the tunnel. Someone was in the living room.

Raph was torn. The further he got from Mikey's room, the heavier the weight in his chest felt, the more he felt like he was about to physically shake apart. He didn't want to be alone right now, but he couldn't face the humiliation of what had happened. The moment Raph heard voices filtering down the tunnel, though, his decision was made for him. Like a moth to the flame, his feet carried him closer until he could make out who the speakers were.

"Mikey's still in there, so even if he wakes up, he won't be alone," Donnie said in a hushed tone.

"I see," Splinter answered. "That is good idea Donnie, very smart. Better to not let him be alone right now."

Fuck fuck ***fuck!*** They were talking about *him!* Raph didn't want to hear this, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. Instead, he stood just around the corner as his dad and brother continued.

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you about everything that happened today sooner. And I'm sorry I texted you not to come in. He's still kind of, y'know, *weird* about you. We didn't want to make things worse by dragging you into it."

"It's okay, Donnie. I understand," Splinter sighed.

“I’ve never seen him like that. He was like, so upset that I’m not sure he was really even hearing us,” Donnie whispered. Raph hated how frightened he sounded. “Dad, it…it *really* freaked me and Mikey out.”

“I know it’s scary to see your brother like this, but this is a good thing, I think. I called his doctor a bit ago when you texted me what was happening. She told me she thought something like this might happen soon. She believes he is close to accepting the truth.”

“That’s…that’s good,” Donnie said weakly. “So you think this is like, some sort of breakthrough or something?”

“Yes,” Splinter affirmed. “But the doctor thinks there may be more of these…episodes. Raph is a fighter, and he has been fighting *this* for so long now. It will be difficult for him to accept that admitting Leo is gone is not the same as admitting *defeat*.”

Fuck, Raph *really* didn’t want to hear this. He knew he should leave. He should *leave*. Fuck. *Why wasn’t he leaving?!*

“Sometimes I really wish he wasn’t so stubborn,” Donnie sighed.

“Don’t we all!” Splinter laughed, and Raph wanted to fucking cry. He shouldn’t have come down the hall, and he shouldn’t have stayed to listen. He already knew he drove them all fucking insane, that they were fed up with his bullshit. He didn’t need to hear it again.

The regret and shame were enough to break Raph free of his paralysis. However, as soon as he began to turn and leave, Splinter continued.

“But you are *all* stubborn, in your own ways. Even Leo was.”

Raph hoped his father’s sensitive ears hadn’t picked up the sudden, sharp intake of breath at the mention of Leo. He rarely got to hear Splinter talk about Leo. Aside from this year’s remembrance service and Christmas morning, Splinter hadn’t said a word about Leo in front of Raph in so, so long. After all the terrible things Raph had said to him about Leo, Raph didn’t blame him. Raph hoped he would continue, but Splinter immediately returned to the topic of Raph himself.

“It will be hard for him once it happens. And it will be hard for *us* to see him finally mourn. But it will mean that we will all be able to move forward together. This will be difficult, but it will be for the best.”

“I know…but I still feel so freaking *horrible* about it, Dad,” Donnie said miserably. “I used to be scared of talking to him because I thought he might blow up on me like he did with *you*. But now I’m just scared of upsetting him over and over again.”

“Again?” Splinter sounded surprised. “What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve…*triggered* him,” Donnie mumbled, tripping over the phrase.

“This is not your fault, Donnie—”

“It is though!” Donnie shot back, his voice cracking. “I went off on him a few weeks ago and just left him there alone in the sewer, and he told me later he almost had a panic attack over it and—and I did it again today! *Ugh*, I was just so freaked out, I shouldn’t have said anything about—”

Donnie cut himself off, and Raph knew why. Donnie still hadn’t told Splinter about his and Mikey’s college acceptance letters.

“Donnie,” Splinter said softly. “You know I rely on you and Mikey to tell me what’s going on with him since he does not talk to me anymore. And *I* know that this is not fair to either of you. Raph is not the only one who has been hurt by this. But I know that he is uncomfortable with me still. It is why I try so hard to give him space, to leave when he comes into the room. The doctor thinks that I maybe did not do this right. That I have made a mistake this way. So…I stay now, try to talk to him, let him get used to me again.”

Jesus…Jesus fucking Christ, was that really what had been happening this whole fucking time? Raph had been *so certain* Splinter immediately vacating whatever room Raph entered was because he couldn’t stand the presence of his most disappointing son. Raph let himself sag against the wall, the weight of his misunderstanding nearly crushing him. Why hadn’t he even *considered* that Splinter was just trying to give him space?

So consumed by the enormity of his feelings, Raph nearly missed the soft sound of movement. Raph wouldn't dare try to peek for fear of being spotted, but he imagined that Splinter might be moving to sit closer to Donnie. Maybe he was putting an arm around his brother's shoulders in support. Maybe he was even hugging Donnie. The thought made Raph's chest ache. When was the last time his father had hugged him? When was the last time he'd let Splinter near enough to try?

"I know this is hard, but I still need your help," Splinter told Donnie. "Why is it you think Raph was so upset tonight, and why would you think it was your fault?"

"Earlier I was talking to him about…about us all going to college next year, and he almost had a p*anic attack* over it, Dad! He did this like, breathing thing and I thought he was okay, but then he comes back later totally freaking out about not wanting us to leave him. If just *talking* about leaving was enough to set him off this badly, then I don't…I don't think we can actually do it."

"Donnie…"

"We don't wanna let you down, Dad. We know we're so, so lucky that we have the chance to go to college and everything. And I didn't wanna tell you this without Mikey but…Dad, Mikey and I want to stay here until Raph's better. I think…I think he *needs* us to stay."

"Oh Donnie," Splinter sighed, his voice thick with emotion. "You are such good brothers. Leonardo would be *so proud* of you. He always cared so much about looking after you three. When I made him the leader—"

Nope nope fucking *nope*. Whatever Splinter was about to say, Raph didn't need to hear. Today was not the day to revisit *that* topic. The spike of fear finally sent Raph back down the hall to his room, mind racing just as fast as his feet.

What was he going to do? Raph wasn't upset over the prospect of Donnie and Mikey leaving. He *needed* them to leave. If they didn't leave, he couldn't go looking for Leo. But thanks to this… *whatever* the fuck it was, his family thought he was having a breakdown over the thought of Mikey and Donnie leaving him.

It was ridiculous. Raph loved his brothers, and he would miss them, of course. But them going off to college and leaving him behind wasn't anything to have a fucking breakdown over.

…was it?

Raph shut his bedroom door behind him, and only made it a few steps into the room before he froze. The sight of his own bed, covers spilling halfway onto the floor from when he'd fallen out, had stopped him dead in his tracks.

What the fuck had *happened* to him? If he wasn't worked up over the idea of his brothers leaving, then why had he freaked out like this? Why had he woken feeling so…abandoned? So devastatingly alone? It had been unbearable. It was *still* unbearable. In fact, the longer Raph stood there alone in his room, the more his heart raced.

Why did he come here? Why didn't he stay with Mikey? Why had he just hidden around the corner like a fucking coward instead of going into the living room with Donnie and Splinter? He should go back. He should tell him Donnie was wrong, that he and Mikey should go, that Raph would be fine. Raph was fine. He was *fine.*

Then why can't you fucking move?

Raph's already thundering heart kicked into overdrive. His knees had locked. His jaw was clenched tight. He couldn't open it to breathe through his mouth. The only air he was getting was through his nose, and it was not enough. His chest was on fire. He couldn't raise his arms to rub at it like he so badly wanted to. Just like his legs, his arms were stuck. Everything was stuck.

Just like everyone thought he was, Raph was stuck.

How long Raph stood there, a terrified, unwilling statue, he didn't know. He still didn't have his phone. It was over on his nightstand. The same nightstand that contained Leo's book.

Don't think about it.

He didn't want to think about it or what he'd almost done to it. He didn't want to think about anything. Not Leo's old book, not his gross misinterpretation of Splinter's absence, not the agonizing *something* in his chest threatening to burst through his plastron, not the devastating, *terrifying loneliness—*

There was a knock on the door. Relief flooded Raph's veins, and yet he still could not move. There was another knock, this one sounding much more urgent, but Raph still could not respond. He'd been so angry at Donnie earlier for not respecting his privacy, but now Raph could only hope he'd disregard it once more. Sure enough, the door swung open almost immediately after a third knock went unanswered.

"Raph," Donnie said, slightly breathless in Raph's doorway. Raph couldn't turn his head, but he could see out of his peripheral when Mikey appeared a microsecond later looking just awake enough to be worried. Raph wished he couldn't see the panic on both of his brothers' faces. "You weren't in Mikey's room."

Raph didn't know what he was supposed to say to that. Even if he could have thought of something, he wasn't sure he'd be able to say it anyway. His throat felt like it was in an invisible vice grip. He swallowed hard against the pressure that he knew was just in his head.

Mikey had wormed his way around Donnie and into the room. He approached Raph timidly, as if Raph might bolt or lash out like a scared animal. Maybe he would. Maybe he'd even explode if Mikey touched him. Mikey looked like he was about to. His hand was raised and reaching out. Raph wanted to recoil away. He wanted to spare his brother the fallout of the living landmine he was about to trip.

Nervous fingers found Raph's forearm. There was no explosion, no catastrophic destruction. Raph whimpered in relief. Mikey's touch seemed to melt the ice that had frozen Raph's joints in place, his head finally turning toward his brothers. He raised a hand to cover Mikey's, making sure his brother wouldn't let go.

"What's…what's going on, Raph?" Mikey asked, soft but scared.

"*I don't know*," Raph whispered dangerously. His breathing kicked up.

"Is there, like…any way we can help?" Donnie questioned awkwardly as he entered the room and closed the door behind him.

"I don't know," Raph repeated. He watched Donnie and Mikey exchange concerned looks. He hated that he was worrying them, hated that this was just more of his bullshit weighing them down…*holding them back.*

His breath caught in his throat as the thought came to him. Mikey's grip on his arm tightened, and Raph focused on it with everything he had as he thought about Donnie's offer to help. Selfish as it was, Raph *did* want help. He didn't want to feel like this. He hated this. He wanted it to stop. He just didn't know *how.* His frustration boiled over in a rush of words.

"I'm sorry guys, I'm not trying to freak you out, but *I'm* freaking out and I don't know *why.*"

"That's okay," Mikey said quickly. "We're not…freaking out. We're just worried."

"I'm sorry," was all Raph could say to Mikey's outright lie.

"Don't be sorry, dude," Donnie chimed in. "*I'm* the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have piled all that stuff on you."

Raph only shook his head. He wanted to tell Donnie it wasn't his fault, but he had no explanation for why this was happening. If he was completely honest with himself, right now he didn't even want to know. He just wanted it to *stop.*

"I feel like I'm gonna—" he broke off, unable to say it, but he was sure his brothers understood anyway. There was no way he didn't look like he was on the verge of a panic attack. "I just want it to fucking *happen already* so I can get it over with, but it *won't!*"

Raph broke the hold Mikey had on his arm as he brought his hands to his face, the heels of his palms pressing against his eyes in frustration. He could feel his arms shaking as he pushed in harder. It hurt, but *this* hurt he could control. Unlike the awful, inexplicable pressure that was closing in on him from every side, *this* pressure he could stop whenever he wanted.

"Whoa—*whoa, dude!*" Donnie sputtered. Raph could both hear and sense that Donnie had moved closer, but he still flinched when he felt Donnie's hands on his wrists. Donnie began pulling Raph's hands away, and Raph let out a weak, pitiful keen. It wasn't lost on him that he'd just done the same thing for Donnie earlier, but the embarrassment of just how pathetic he was being was too much. He felt tears gathering in the corners of his sore eyes as Donnie looked at him in alarm.

Whether Donnie letting go and taking a step back was out of his own discomfort or just an attempt to give Raph some space to breathe, Raph wasn't sure. He made quick work of swiping away the tears before they had a chance to trail down his face.

They had probably thought Raph wouldn't notice while he did so, but he still caught the way Donnie and Mikey shot each other a series of looks that seemed to only mean something to each other. Raph wasn't stupid; he knew they probably talked about him all the time when he wasn't around. It was still upsetting, though, to see that it happened so frequently that they could apparently do it without even *speaking*. How often did they silently communicate behind his back like this? How many times had he been in the room, but entirely out of the loop?

The thought plunged Raph into the dark, terrifying depths of loneliness once more. They were here. He could see them. He could reach out and touch them if he wanted. They were *here*, but somehow Raph was still separate from them. He stared at the wall, unable to watch the evidence of his isolation a moment longer.

It was coming. This had been the last straw. *Finally*. Whether it was a panic attack or something worse, Raph didn't care. Something needed to happen. Something needed to break, even if it was him. He couldn't do this anymore. He had never felt so defeated, so willing to give up and give in, but he wanted to be done. *I'm done.*

A hand returned to his arm, and Raph was violently yanked back from the edge of whatever terrible thing had been about to happen.

"Hey! Hey, stay with us, bro," Mikey urged anxiously, waving his other hand in front of Raph's face frantically. Raph's eyes needed a second to focus on him, but Mikey and Donnie had both entered his field of vision. They could say they weren't freaking out as much as they wanted, but it was written all over their faces.

"Dude I know you wanna get it out of the way or, or whatever," Donnie said, seeming to cringe at his own phrasing. "But let's—let's try to not check out, okay?"

Raph was surprised by how adamantly they didn't want this to happen. Why did it matter? Raph supposed it must be pretty scary to watch. It would probably make his brothers feel bad if he willingly slipped into an attack when they were trying so hard to help him. He guessed he owed it to them to try just as hard.

"Okay," Raph whispered. "I'm trying."

"Okay," Mikey repeated back, swallowing hard as he nodded at Raph.

“You…you got this, Raph. I know this fucking sucks,” Donnie said, doing what seemed to be his best to sound comforting and supportive. “Should…should you go take a shower?”

Raph’s eyebrows drew together, conveying his confusion.

“You said it helps, right?”

“Helps *after,*” Raph ground out, hoping his brothers understood that whatever this was, it was very much *still happening.*

“Right, okay, okay…” Donnie fretted, tapping his chin rapidly in thought. Raph felt sorry for him. He was trying so hard to find the solution to the problem, and Raph had nothing for him. “Can you uh, can you do that breathing thing again?”

Raph shook his head again. Guiding himself through a 4-7-8 breathing exercise felt impossible right now. *Everything* felt impossible.

His poor brothers looked almost as lost as Raph felt. He knew he could never be the leader that Leo was, but he was still a big brother. He should have the answer. He should know what to do. He should be able to help his brothers, even if what they needed help with was *him*.

“I don’t know what to do,” Raph hissed miserably, hating the admission as it escaped past his lips.

An awful, awkward silence blanketed the room. The weight of it was suffocating. Raph couldn’t take this. He’d never really been able to stand an uncomfortable silence, a weakness both his therapist and his father had exploited. Suddenly, though, it seemed that was more than weakness; it was a fatal flaw. This quietness was going to kill him. He was going to fucking die if he had to spend *one more second* in this terrifying, deafening silence.

“I know you’re uh…freaking out and don’t know what’s going on,” Mikey said, voice wobbling a little despite his obvious effort to sound in control. “But do you think you can like, tell us what you’re thinking about right now?”

"*S'too quiet*," Raph answered in a pitiful little whimper. He didn't want them to know how fucking pathetic he was, that big bad Raphael couldn't handle a little silence, but he couldn't stand it a moment longer.

Mikey's grip on Raph's arm tightened, and without any further warning, Raph was being dragged from his room. It should scare him how he never resisted, how easily his brothers were able to move him around whenever he was like this, but he was glad nevertheless. Movement meant he wasn't stuck.

"Mikey, what're you doing?" Raph heard Donnie ask from where he trailed behind them.

"Improvising."

Raph allowed himself to be led down the hall and was surprised when Mikey brought him not to his own room, but Donnie's instead. Their brother made no protests when Mikey opened the door and pulled Raph along through it. Donnie followed, closing the door behind him.

The lights were off, save for the purple LEDs of Donnie's gaming PC setup. Raph had never really been afraid of the dark, but he still appreciated the soft glow that illuminated the room. It felt cozy. Warm. Good. Safe…*Familiar.*

It *shouldn't* feel familiar, though. Despite having more-or-less patched things up with his brothers, it was usually Raph's or Mikey's room they hung out in these days. Donnie was *very* particular about how his room was kept, and rarely gave his brothers the opportunity to "mess it up".

Donnie had always been meticulous about his things. It had been source of much childhood angst when Donnie's stuff was so often the victim of the chaos of four brothers sharing a room. Splinter had given Donnie the tent for his bed to give him some semblance of a personal space, which was where he'd ended up keeping his most prized possessions; his computers.

It hadn't been all that surprising, then, that Donnie had gone a little overboard once he'd finally had his own space. Albeit gently, even *Leo* had teased Donnie when he started obsessively browsing subreddits and blogs for tips and ideas. It was hard to argue with the results, though. With his impressive desktop setup and organized shelves of collectables and gaming consoles, it was hard to even tell Donnie's bedroom was located in a sewer.

Raph didn't have much time to take in the tidiest room in the Lair, though, as he was dragged along. Mikey had led him to Donnie's bed, guiding him to sit on the floor with his shell against the mattress. If his insides didn't still feel like a cement mixer, Raph would've cracked a smile. It had been a while, but he still knew what was coming.

A younger Raph from what felt like an entirely different life would've put up a token protest, grumbling as Mikey got them situated. Now, however, Raph made no effort to stop Mikey's well practiced order of operations. Mikey tossed part of Donnie's comforter over Raph's shell, letting the sides drape over Raph's shoulders. In the past, Mikey would have chucked a pillow at Raph to put in his lap for his elbows to rest on, maybe even hit him in the head with it a couple times before Raph would wrench it free from his grip. Instead, tonight Mikey gently handed it to his older brother.

Raph took it, grateful to have something to hold onto while his brothers continued getting ready. Donnie's gaming setup was his pride and joy, and Raph almost winced as he watched his little brother haphazardly rearrange his monitor to face the bed. Raph wanted to say he could move, Donnie didn't need to mess up his stuff for him, but he knew it would have been pointless. Not only because his brothers were clearly in mission mode now, but because he wasn't sure he could stand up again anytime soon.

"You wanna pick?" Donnie asked, gesturing to his shelves.

Raph surveyed his options, of which there were many. In addition to his gaming PC, Donnie had a frankly absurd amount of consoles. And not just the newest ones; Donnie's collection included systems from nearly every generation and brand. Some they had salvaged or stolen, and some had been purchased legitimately after their acceptance into the human world. A few were inoperable, simply on display until Donnie finished his current console restoration project.

Raph was debating on whether he could push his luck and get Donnie to boot up his brand new Sakicom that he hadn't yet let either of his brothers try. Then he spotted something much, much older on one of the shelves.

"That still work?" Raph asked, nodding jerkily toward the old console half obscured by its newer iterations. Donnie squinted to see what Raph was looking at, then laughed as he saw it.

"You *bet* it does," Donnie grinned. He shuffled things around, extracting the ancient Nintendo 64 with a dramatic flourish. "This thing would survive an apocalypse. Like, literally. Did you know there's a Game Boy that still works after being halfway melted in the Gulf War? They just don't make shit like this anymore, man."

Raph snorted as Donnie launched into an energetic rant on gaming console components while setting up the old system. He hadn't even meant to, but he was happy he'd given Donnie something to info dump about. Raph let the sound of Donnie's voice wash over him, not really listening, but very much enjoying the lack of silence. Donnie's enthusiastic rambling had cut the tension in the room, and Raph began to feel a little less uneasy.

The old tube TV they used to play the N64 on was still in Leo's room, but Donnie fished an adapter out of one of his drawers. Raph listened quietly to Donnie's comments on the industry transition from RCA to HDMI while he plugged the now obsolete red, white, and yellow component cables into the adapter.

As Donnie began digging the controllers out of another drawer, Mikey crawled into the bed to finish his own setup. He sat cross legged behind Raph, shins pressing up against his brother's back, then leaned forward to rest his forearms on the top ridge of Raph's shell. The weight was comfortable. Ever so slightly, Raph felt himself begin to relax into the position he and Mikey had shared since childhood.

It had started when they were little. Years before they'd been old enough to do supply runs on the surface themselves, Splinter had brought the old console home for them one night after Donnie had sprained his ankle a few days earlier during training. The boredom and frustration of being stuck in bed for days had finally boiled over into an enormous crying fit, and Splinter had set out to find something to occupy Donnie's overactive mind while on bedrest.

Splinter had explained that the thrift store he'd taken it from only had two controllers, so they'd have to take turns. Donnie, of course, got priority. When the argument between the remaining three over who would get to play first alongside Donnie turned into a brawl, Splinter stepped in and had chosen Leo to go first. Knowing that Raph would almost certainly restart the fight for the second controller the moment he left the room, Splinter had picked up his smallest son and placed him on top of Raph's shell.

"Mikey, you stay up here to make sure Raph waits his turn, ok?" Splinter had told Mikey, who had taken the order *very* seriously. Each and every time they played after that, Mikey always sat on his Raph's shoulders until it was his turn. Mikey wouldn't even leave when it was *his* turn, instead just holding the controller over Raph's head while he angrily batted the cord out of his face.

The routine had continued even after they'd managed to procure more controllers. It had eventually gotten to the point that playing games together just didn't feel right to Raph unless Mikey was glued to his shell. Feeling his little brother there after so long was another one of those things Raph hadn't realized he'd missed until he had it back.

“Hey,” Mikey mumbled in Raph’s ear when Donnie’s rambling died down as the game’s opening title animation played. “This okay? Not hurting your shell, is it?”

“No. Doesn’t hurt at all,” Raph told him truthfully. Mikey was probably worried about the hole where the bullet had entered through his carapace. Long since repaired and plugged with epoxy, Raph couldn’t feel it.

“Here,” Donnie said, holding out a controller for Raph as he rolled in his gaming chair next to Raph. The controller was a translucent red, its electronic innards visible through the plastic. It was the same one he’d always used once they’d scrounged up a couple more so they could all play together.

“I’ll, uh…I’ll just watch.” Raph swallowed. He didn’t think he could take the controller if he tried. He was still hugging the pillow in his lap instead of using it as an arm rest. He didn’t want to let go of it. He hoped it wasn’t obvious, but he knew it had to be.

“Yeah, that’s um, that’s cool, dude,” Donnie said awkwardly, scooting forward to set it beside the console before rolling back next to the bed and close to Raph. If Donnie had been trying to be smooth about repositioning so one of his legs pressed up against Raph’s side, he had failed spectacularly. Raph wasn’t about to call him out on it, though. Especially not after he reflexively leaned into the contact.

Donnie had put in Raph’s favorite: Super Smash Brothers. He didn’t even care how stereotypical it seemed, he fucking *loved* fighting games. This was one of the first games they’d ever owned, having been stolen at the same time as the console itself. As the sounds of non-stop cartoon carnage filled the room, Raph was sure that his affinity for violence wasn’t the only reason Donnie had picked this particular game.

Raph watched as Mikey and Donnie found their rhythm after a few rounds, the muscle memory of old combo moves learned years ago coming back to them. While the pandemonium on the screen may have been getting progressively more extreme, Raph felt the overall intensity of the situation decrease as his brothers played. He certainly hadn’t relaxed, but Raph had finally stopped feeling like he was about to combust at any given moment. The comfortable weight of Mikey on his back and the warm pressure of Donnie’s leg against his right side seemed to be doing a pretty good job of holding him together.

After more than an hour of this, Raph realized that this wasn’t just comfortable; this was *grounding* in a way Raph had never experienced. Usually, he only had himself to rely on to stay present and bring himself back to baseline. Right now, his brothers were doing the work, and Raph couldn’t have been more grateful. Everything was *still* too much, the anxiety *still* just on the cusp of boiling over, but he

no longer felt like every passing second was worse than the last. For once, Raph was not alone in this fight against the horrible, agonizing thing that writhed and throbbed inside him.

"How'd you know this was gonna help?" Raph asked while Mikey's Yoshi stood victorious on the screen, Donnie's Samus in second and the two NPCs in 3rd and 4th.

"I dunno. Just a hunch, I guess," Mikey mumbled, and Raph felt Mikey move in what must have been a small shrug.

Maybe he *had* helped his brothers help him. This is what he'd done for Mikey when he was upset, after all. Maybe not the grounding physical touch thing, but Raph *had* brought Mikey to his room to play games the morning of the remembrance service. Maybe Mikey understood how Raph was feeling in some way. He wished he didn't.

I wish you didn't. You were never like this before.

The ferocity of that last thought started Raph enough that he jerked forward, jostling Mikey behind him.

"Whoa, Raph, you good?" Mikey asked nervously.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," Raph mumbled a little breathlessly. Why had he just jumped like that? He couldn't remember what he'd been thinking about. Maybe he was cramping up from sitting here on the floor for so long. He unbent his legs and let out a shaky sigh as he stretched. God, he was so fucking sore from tensing up for however many hours this had been happening. Maybe it was time to take Donnie up on his suggestion of a shower.

He twisted this way and that to loosen up his upper body, and caught a glimpse of each of his brothers as he did. Fuck, they both looked *exhausted.* It was easily 3 or 4 in the morning at this point, and Raph was glad they were still on Christmas vacation from school. There was no way any of them were getting up at a reasonable hour after this. He took a few breaths and gathered his thoughts to address Donnie and Mikey.

"Guys…I'm really sorry for…y'know, being a fucking basket case all night. I wish I could tell you what was going on, but I seriously don't fucking know. I'll try to just deal with this with Dr. Hart, but I just…I really, really fucking appreciate you guys just…"

He couldn't finish, but he wasn't sure he needed to. Both of his brothers were looking thoroughly embarrassed, but relieved as well. Raph realized this was probably the most normal he'd seemed since he came home from Casey's.

Jesus, had sparring with Casey *really* been just earlier that same day? Fuck, Raph *really* did need a shower then. Between sparring with Casey and hours of sweating through whatever the fuck this whole situation had been, Raph suddenly hyper aware of just how gross he was. He was *absolutely* going to go shower now. He told his brothers so, each looking a little apprehensive as Raph assured them he was good to go. He forced himself to his feet, took a few breaths, and headed toward the door.

On his way out, he spotted a box of electronics shoved to the side of Donnie's desk. That in itself wasn't unusual given that this was Donnie's room. What was unusual, however, was how haphazardly the contents of the box seemed to have been packed. Being abnormally messy in an otherwise immaculate room, no wonder it had caught Raph's eye. It took a moment to realize what it was.

"Is this your…your streaming stuff?" Raph said, stopping to drag the box toward himself to take a closer look. Sure enough, through the jumble of cables inside, Raph could see a microphone and the pieces of its stand. Raph looked over to Donnie, who seemed absolutely mortified.

Fuck. Just when everything had finally started to calm down, Raph had to go stick his *stupid foot* in his *stupid mouth*. Donnie had started streaming shortly after they'd started school and had garnered a good amount of followers in no time flat. Donnie had been uncharacteristically modest about it, chalking it up to people just being interested in the whole mutant thing, but he'd retained his following even after the initial hype around their existence died down. He had even been making some decent money for someone not streaming full time, which of course he put toward more consoles and more games to stream.

It had all come to an abrupt and unceremonious end when Leo was taken. Agonizingly, Raph could almost picture how the box had ended up like this. Donnie must have been in so much pain to have dismantled his streaming equipment with so little care, to shove something that brought him so much joy into a box, to shut the lid on this thing that he had loved. Fuck.

And it wasn't just Donnie. Mikey had quit improv club. He'd been almost obnoxiously obsessed with standup, always bothering Raph and the others to join him watching so-and-so's streaming special. After much begging, Mikey had even dragged them to a couple live shows. Once Leo had gone, so too had Mikey's insatiable need for comedic entertainment.

So much more than just their brother had been taken from them, and Raph wanted it *back.* For so long, his focus had been on getting Leo back, and Leo alone. Everything else could wait…but it didn't have to. Maybe if Raph could give Donnie a little push, he'd stop waiting.

"You…you thinkin' about getting back into it?" Raph asked, knowing he didn't sound as cool as he wanted.

"I dunno…I mean, maybe not the streaming on Twitch. Just like…some video essay stuff for Youtube, y'know? The couple I did before seemed to do okay…"

"You should," Raph said instantly. "You're great at that stuff."

Donnie looked at Raph like he'd said something completely out of pocket.

"What?" Raph questioned.

"I didn't think you watched any of it," Donnie replied, soft and sincere.

"Of course I did," Raph told him. He wasn't about to admit to Donnie that when they'd drifted apart, he used to put them on just to hear his brother's voice. "I'm serious. You should totally make some new videos, dude. You like, got any ideas already?"

"Well…I was thinking about doing one on like, the Sony vs Microsoft vs Saki rivalry," Donnie started out slowly, but his obvious excitement grew as he continued. "And y'know, not to be the biggest fucking Saki fanboy, but I could go into how the Sakicom has like, basically *always* outclassed the Playstation and the Xbox. I mean, I've only played like two games on the Sakicom Omni so far, but it feels like it's *decades* ahead of the PS6. And don't even get me *started* on how much better it is than the last Xbox…"

Apparently Raph *had* gotten Donnie started, though, because his brother launched into another lengthy diatribe on the "console wars". Raph stood there and felt a smile creep across his face for the first time all night. He caught Mikey's eye, who was grinning. Donnie's gaze had fixed on some random point near his desk as he rambled, so Raph cocked an eyebrow before subtly rolling his eyes. Mikey's grin turned devious before he began miming away behind Donnie's back, throwing his hands up in wild, exaggerated gestures that mirrored Donnie's. Raph had to contain a snort of laughter. Mikey stopped his charades to beam back at Raph with a thumbs up.

Huh. Maybe Mikey and Donnie *weren't* the only ones who could have a conversation together without speaking.

Raph once again took way too long in the shower, and it took everything he had to finally step out. So thoroughly exhausted by everything that had happened, Raph sluggishly began the journey back to Donnie's room.

He was about halfway there by the time he realized he'd bitten off more than he could chew. The shower had been so warm and comfortable that he'd felt fine. But the hall was dark, cold, and empty. Raph was the only one here. He was…fuck, *fuck*, he was *alone.*

His knees locked, and Raph stuck a shaking hand toward the wall of the sewer tunnel to keep himself from swaying. He traced the damp mortar between the bricks with his thumb, trying so, so fucking hard not to disappear.

"Raph…hey, Raph, it's okay."

Raph's body couldn't move, but it could apparently still cry. He let tout a few hiccupping breaths in relief when he heard Mikey.

"Raph," Mikey said softly. "I know you're scared."

Raph wanted to deny it. He couldn't. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't even turn his head to look at Mikey.

"I'm scared too," his brother told him in a too-tiny voice. There was nothing Raph could do to stop his tears from finally spilling over.

“I was coming to check on you…glad I did. I don’t know if you’re really hearing me, but I’m right here.” Mikey’s hands grabbed Raph’s free one. They were shaking. Raph’s heart beat faster as Mikey’s trembling thumbs ran back and forth over his knuckles.

“I wish *he* was here,” Mikey whispered. “He’d know what to do. Donnie and I don’t know what to *do*, Raph. I’m sorry we keep messing up. I’m sorry I—”

Something in Raph’s face must have shown that he was registering what Mikey was saying, because Mikey’s eyes widened and filled with giant, fat tears. The eye contact was short lived, however, Mikey suddenly tipping forward into Raph’s chest. Raph felt the dampness of Mikey’s tears through his shirt.

“I’m sorry I slammed the door in your face,” Mikey choked out in a rush. One of his hands left Raphs to grasp at Raph’s shirt. “I’m sorry I shoved you and told you to leave! I was just so mad and—and *scared*, and I’m *so sorry!”*

It was difficult, but Raph’s stiff arms moved mechanically to wrap around his little brother. Mikey cried harder when Raph somehow found the will to rub one hand up and down Mikey’s shell.

“I’m sorry,” Mikey groaned as he shook his head furiously against Raph’s plastron. “I’m s’posed to be making *you* feel better, n-not the other way ‘round.”

“Does, though,” Raph grunted. Oh, talking was back on the menu now, was it? Thank fuck.

Mikey pulled back to look up at Raph in confusion. “What?”

“Makes me feel better.”

“What does?” Mikey asked hopefully, as if Raph was about to hand him a user manual for his fucked up big brother.

“Lookin’ out for you guys,” Raph told Mikey.

He had expected Mikey to laugh a little, maybe tell Raph that was dumb. Instead, Mikey's face screwed up angrily before he practically snarled at Raph.

"That's not *your* job!"

Raph felt like the floor had been yanked out from underneath him. Mikey reeled back, horror written on every inch of his face as he clamped his hands over his mouth. Raph swallowed hard, looking away from Mikey to stare down the hall at nothing.

"Oh my god, I'm *so sorry*," Mikey whispered frantically through his fingers.

Alongside the pounding of his own heart, Raph heard the echo of his own words.

*That wasn't his job! It was **yours**!*

Raph wasn't sure why he hadn't ever expected this. It shouldn't be so surprising to have his words used against him. He *deserved* it, really, to have one of the many terrible things he'd said to Splinter thrown back at him. He only wished he could take it more gracefully than this. As it was, though, his vision swam as his entire body locked up once again.

"I'm—god—I'm so so sorry, I'm such an *idiot!* I'll—I'll go get Donnie—"

"No!" Raph cried, practically a scream. Heat overtook his face, but he couldn't let Mikey leave. "Don't—don't fuckin' *leave* me here, Mikey. *Please*."

"Okay…" Mikey said, his posture oozing with reluctance.

Raph hadn't realized his hand had returned to the wall. *Fuck.* It was cold. He wanted warmth. He raised his other arm, gesturing weakly for Mikey to come back. He pulled Mikey back in against him.

God, he was so, *so* fucking tired. He wanted this night to be over, but he couldn't leave this unaddressed.

“Dude…I’m like, so fucking embarrassed by how messed up I’ve been tonight. And even though I really, *really* want to, I’ve been trying super fucking hard not to hide how bad it is. Because even though *you’re* trying to hide it, I know this is freaking you out and you guys wanna help me, and you can’t if I’m…if I’m not *honest* with you about what’s going on with me.”

He squeezed Mikey tightly before continuing.

“I kinda need you to return the favor now. Okay?”

“I’m sorry I said that…” Mikey finally murmured into his chest after a few long moments. “I just…it scares me to hear you say something like that.”

“Why?”

“Because…because *looking out for us* is what got him *killed*.”

“Hugging you when you’re upset isn’t gonna make me wind up like Leo, Mikey.”

“You don’t *know* that,” Mikey moaned.

“They made if pretty fucking clear they only wanted Leo.”

“No, they wanted the *leader*,” Mikey shot back. “And I feel like you…you think you gotta be the leader because of what I said before the service this year. And I wish I *hadn’t* said that, because I don’t *want* you to be the leader. We…we have a normal life now. We don’t have to be a ninja team, we don’t have to *do* that stuff anymore. I just want us to be *brothers*. Just…normal brothers.”

“I don’t…know if I can do that, Mikey.”

“What? Why?” Mikey looked distraught.

“We can be brothers, sure…but *normal?* You looked in a fuckin’ mirror lately, Mike?”

It took a moment for Mikey to process that Raph was joking, finally a startled laugh bubbled out of him. Raph grinned down at Mikey.

“Okay,” Mikey said, sobering up. “If we…if we can’t be *normal* brothers, can we maybe be the kinda brothers who like…all sleep in the same room for tonight because they all had a really, really bad day and none of ‘em really wanna be alone right now?”

Raph sagged against Mikey, laughing a little himself as he did.

“Yeah, Mike. I think we can be those kinda brothers.”

The door opened. The light from the hall poured in through the doorway, and he scrambled wildly backward as if it might burn him. His shell hit the wall, forcing a gasp from deep in his chest. He clamped his mouth shut, jaw clenched so tight it hurt, but there was no hiding the shuddering sobs trapped in his throat.

“Enough of that. I do hope this has been a sufficient amount of time to reflect on our last conversation.”

He had no way of knowing for certain how much time had passed. His best guess was a few weeks. With how often he…*drifted*, it had long since become impossible to keep track using meals. He didn’t want to know anyway. Knowing would be worse.

“If you were to join us for our session today, I’m sure I would be able I reschedule your next appointment with Cynthia. She’ll throw the usual fuss, of course, but I *do* have priority over your time per our agreement. You would be wise to take advantage of that.”

He moaned into his palms. He didn't want her to come for him, but why delay it? Wouldn't it be better to just get it over with? But then the clock would only restart. He would always be waiting for next time, always stuck in this horrible anticipation of the inevitable.

"Though, I must say you do not have a history of making the wisest decisions. Will today be different?"

Stupid stupid *stupid*, he was always so *stupid*, what a dumb fucking animal, can't even sit up straight, can't look anyone in the eye, *stop shaking*, get up and fight, fight, *fucking fight*, so weak, fucking pathetic, so tired, worthless worthless *worthless*—

No! No, he couldn't forget. He wasn't *completely* worthless. Not yet. Not when he still had a job to do. He could still be useful if he could protect. He had to. That was all he had now. All he could do. Protect them. *Protect protect* ***protect.***

"Y-yes."

A deafening bang resounded through the room, the bars of his cell still reverberating with the force of the impact. After so long of hearing nothing but his own breathing, it was too much. Despite the barrier separating them, he could not stop from throwing his hands over his head. His knees dew up to his heaving chest, and he wished his mutation hadn't made it impossible to bring his limbs into his shell.

"TRY AGAIN."

He couldn't breathe. *He couldn't fucking breathe*. He wanted Raph. Raph was better at this than him. Raph was better at everything. Stronger, too. Raph wouldn't curl up in a pathetic little ball on the floor, wouldn't cry like a child, wouldn' fall apart over a loud noise and raised voice.

But he couldn't ask for Raph's help. Not now, not ever again. It had been tempting, so fucking tempting, to take Raph up on his offer to take over for him. To fight for him. He would have called it a moment of weakness, but he was *always* weak.

"Try again, Leonardo."

There was no stopping the wailing cry of defeat torn from his throat. How could he have ever thought winning was an option when this was all it took? He really *was* hopeless if something as simple as a name had this much power over him. But it had been so long. When had he heard it last? Not in his own mindscape with Raph, but here in the real world? It had been so long. So, so long, he was sure.

He wanted it. He wanted it so badly it brought him to his knees. Somehow despite the shaking, he found himself in seiza. His father had taught him it was a sign of respect, and it was respect that was being demanded of him now. He'd said Leo's name, and now he would not accept an answer without being properly addressed by his *own* name. Leo bowed his head before speaking.

"*Yes*, Master Shredder."

Chapter End Notes

You guys can have a little Leo POV. As a treat.

-

(This note was written on 2/12/24.) I'll respond to any comments in a few days! Heading to the hospital for an outpatient procedure in the morning, and then I'm gonna be a lazy fuck for a few days and finish watching this TMNT Next Mutation DVD box set lol

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Art by @kuch1_k0pi Tumblr | Twitter
- Animation by @halfshellman Tumblr

Chapter 15: Where Would You Like To Start?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Any hopes Raph might have had that he would feel better in the morning were dashed as he slowly blinked the sleep from his eyes. He had once again been spared a nightmare, but he would have gladly taken a terrible night's sleep over *this*. Raph's muscles felt like they'd been tensed all night, and that same inexplicable pressure from yesterday weighed heavily on his chest and head.

Raph rolled over in his bed, grunting in frustration to himself before remembering he wasn't alone. After Mikey's request that they all sleep together, they'd ended up in Raph's room. Raph had tried in vain to talk them into Donnie's or Mikey's instead, but his brothers had insisted on Raph's so he could sleep in his own bed.

Raph was glad he'd had the foresight to swing by his room last night before showering to grab the trashcan of puke. He wasn't sure how he would have explained what had led him to be so sick the morning before. Raph looked uncertainly at his nightstand where he'd shoved Leo's book into the drawer. He wasn't sure it would *ever* be coming out again.

Raph's eyes tore away from the nightstand when he heard movement across the room.

"Hey," Donnie murmured from his spot on the floor. Mikey had slept on the small sofa Raph had wrestled into his room years ago back when he'd had more frequent visitors, and Donnie had set up shop on the floor with an enormous pile of blankets. He pushed himself up on one elbow, looking barely conscious enough to be speaking. He squinted at Raph, his glasses still folded beside his pillow. "How you feeling?"

"Like *shit* still*,* " Raph hissed in frustration. He sat up and leaned his shell against the headboard. He rubbed at his forehead, hoping to relieve some of the pressure he felt in his skull, but stopped when he saw Donnie scramble for his glasses out of the corner of his eye.

Raph dropped his hands, quickly realizing why Donnie was suddenly moving so fast. *He thinks you're hurting yourself again.*

Raph's face burned in shame. He *really* hadn't meant to do that yesterday. He balled his hands in his lap, resisting the overwhelming desire to bury his face in them. He hated this *so much* . What the fuck was happening to him? He didn't want his brothers to see him like this, but asking them to leave him alone would be so much worse.

"Sorry," Raph rasped. "Was really hoping I was just gonna…sleep whatever the fuck this is off. But I don't feel any different."

"It's…It's okay, dude," Donnie said uneasily. "We'll figure it out."

Raph just barely kept himself from visibly reacting to the hint of fear in Donnie's voice. They'd put up a good front, but Mikey had admitted last night that he was scared. It was obvious Donnie was, too.

"Where's Mikey?"

"He woke me up a bit ago to tell me he was gonna go shower and, uh…and to talk to Dad."

Raph tried not to startle at that, but he couldn't stop from wincing a little. He rubbed a hand over his face again before looking back to Donnie.

"Sorry," Donnie said, cringing a little as he spoke. "Mikey told me not to lie to you about it."

"Okay," was all Raph could say to that.

"He said last night that…well, he told me he said some shitty stuff. So I guess now I'm not the *only* one who's been a total dick to you."

Raph was about to tell Donnie for the millionth time that it was okay, that he understood why Donnie had said that shit, but his brother continued before Raph could begin.

"He also said you told him to be honest with you, so he wanted you to know he was gonna talk to Dad about what's going on…and I guess I should tell you that, uh…I did, too. Last night."

Raph kept his gaze focused on his hands in his lap. Fuck fuck *fuck* . Now Donnie was being honest with him, too. Raph knew he should do the same, but he was *not* prepared to tell him that he'd overheard last night. He was sure that if he looked Donnie in the eye right now, somehow Donnie would know he wasn't telling him everything.

"…Raph?"

Fuck. He had to give him *something* . If he couldn't own up to the fact that he'd overheard, maybe he could at least be truthful about how he felt over Donnie's admission.

"It's…okay. It kinda…freaks me out a little, but I guess someone's gotta, since I'm too chickenshit to do it myself."

"Dude, that's not what I—"

"No, you were right. About me being…scared to talk to him."

Splinter had been talking to Raph more and more since Thanksgiving, but it was always in the presence of others. When his dad had given Raph Leo's book, they'd been just steps away from the rest of their family. Raph though back to the last time he had a private, one-on-one conversation with Splinter. Asking for permission on Thanksgiving morning to attend Leo's remembrance service had ended in a massive panic attack, and Raph hadn't been able to admit it at the time how right Donnie had been.

"I'm not ready to…" Raph began, but was forced to stop as his jaw clenched tight. God, he was being so *pathetic* . He forced himself to continue. "I'm just not ready for that. So…like, thanks for running interference and doing it for me, I guess."

"Yeah…yeah, whatever you need, man. Mikey and I got you," Donnie said, relief apparent in his voice. Raph watched his eyelids sag a little behind his glasses. He looked fucking exhausted.

"Oh my god, just go back to sleep, dude," Raph snorted, rolling his eyes at the way Donnie fought to keep himself upright.

"Y'sure?" Donnie slurred, looking very much on the edge of zonking out. Now with Raph's suggestion to go back to sleep, all of Donnie's energy seemed to have drained in an instant.

"Yeah, it's fine."

"Kay," Donnie mumbled, flopping down against his pillow and eyes already slamming shut as he continued mumbling sleepily at Raph. "Wake me up if you need something. Or if you need to go somewhere. Bathroom or whatever. Or text Mike. He'll come back."

"Yeah…okay."

Raph was glad Donnie was already falling asleep, because he couldn't stop the way his face burned at Donnie's words. His brothers had apparently decided he was too fragile right now to even go to the bathroom by himself. It was even more humiliating to know that they were right.

There was no way Raph was going back to sleep, though. Not with the churning of his stomach and the tightness in what felt like every inch of his body. Donnie was still here, so Raph wasn't really

alone. But without someone to talk to, he wasn't eager to find out what might happen if he didn't find something to occupy his mind soon.

He fished his phone out from under the blankets where it had somehow ended up. With everything that had happened, Raph hadn't looked at it since yesterday afternoon. He unlocked his screen to find a string of unread messages from Casey.

Casey:

Hey thanks again for the help with the boxes

I totally called it tho, mom acted like she was soooo mad

but I can tell she was happy to basically have it all done

Another set of messages from a timestamp a few hours later followed.

Casey:

And seriously dude, thanks for the stuff on the roof

I know I said what happened wasn't that bad, but it actually kinda was

they fucked me up pretty good before getting to the stabby part

that was supposed to like

finish the job

I just got lucky that it didn't

I bounced back pretty fast from all of it, but it was still a really, really close call

I mean obviously I don't remember because I was under for the surgery, but apparently I fucking flatlined for a sec

anyway sorry if that's like totally weird and oversharing or whatever but yeah, thanks for agreeing to more lessons dude

btw how did it go with your bros? you doing ok?

Holy *fuck*. Raph wanted to respond. He knew it was too much, but part of him wanted to tell Casey everything; what Donnie and Mikey had said, what he'd overheard, how shitty he felt, how absolutely fucked things had gotten. He couldn't, though, because Casey's confession had Raph's attention in a chokehold.

Casey had told Raph that his doctor said it was a miracle he hadn't died, but Raph had thought Casey was just being hyperbolic. But no, Casey had really come *that fucking close* to actually dying. It was hard to imagine someone as energetic and resilient as Casey having their heart stop. The thought made Raph's own heart begin to race.

A thousand questions sprang to the front of his mind. How long had Casey waited for help? Raph hoped it hadn't been long. Had anyone else been there to witness it? Had Casey been forced to lay there, knowing they had seen? Knowing they were all looking? Knowing everyone was watching as he failed to get his shaking limbs to work, failed to push himself up and stand, failed to make it to–

Stop, Raph told himself. But it was weak, and the thoughts steamrolled on.

Just like his own, Casey's scar was large and horribly misshapen. Even without Casey telling him that it hadn't been made with a knife, it was obvious the wound had been horrible. How badly had Casey bled? Had he also lost enough blood to make his vision swim? Did it become difficult for him to make out what was happening around him? Had that made an already frightening situation all the more terrifying?

No, it wouldn't have been like that, Raph tried to reason with himself. It wouldn't have been a problem if Casey had lost a lot of blood, because Casey was a human. He could have received a normal blood transfusion. He wouldn't have had to wait for his brothers to arrive at the hospital so they could donate mutant blood. He wouldn't have had to watch Mikey shake as they stuck a needle in his arm, so obviously terrified it would hurt like it had at TCRI.

By his own admission, Casey hadn't even been conscious during all of it. Raph was glad human drugs had worked for Casey, that he hadn't been awake for it, that he hadn't needed to be restrained because he couldn't stop thrashing as they worked, that he hadn't *felt* it each time as they dug–

Stop, stop, fucking stop! Raph told himself viciously. *It's not the same. Casey didn't fuck up. It wasn't his fault. It's not the same. It doesn't matter anyway. You're alive. It doesn't matter. You got better. It was your own fault. It doesn't matter.*

It really, *really* didn't matter. Not when Leo was still out there. Finding Leo was *all* that mattered. Raph had channeled every ounce of the pain into yelling at anyone who would listen. Why were they sitting with him? Why were they wasting their time staying there as he tried and failed to sleep through the pain? They weren't stuck there. They could be out searching. Why weren't they *listening?*

Eventually, they'd all had enough.

Nobody wants to hear it.

Raph's breath was now coming as fast as his heartbeats. It was coming. He knew it was. He'd missed his window of opportunity to stop this. That didn't matter though, because he deserved it. *It's your own fault* . He *deserved* it.

He may have deserved it, but he didn't *want* it. He didn't want this. He didn't want to feel like this. He didn't want to slip away. He didn't want to be *alone.*

He wasn't, though. Mikey and Donnie were here for him now. They said they would stay. They said they would *help* . They didn't want Raph to feel like this either. They didn't want him to go.

"Stay with us," Mikey had said last night. If Mikey wanted him to stay, then Raph should stay.

"Let's try to not check out, okay?" Donnie had asked him. If Donnie wanted him to try, then Raph would try.

Donnie was just a few feet away, but still asleep. If Raph could get his attention, maybe he could keep this from happening. Just like last night, though, his jaw felt like it had been wired shut. The realization sent his panic ratcheting up to the next level.

Nobody wants to hear it.

Raph whimpered as he reminded himself that Donnie had *just* said to wake him up if Raph needed something. It was okay to ask. It was okay.

"*D-don…* " Raph tried to call, but it was little more than a wheeze. He tried again, panting with each syllable. "*Don…nie!* "

Donnie didn't stir. Raph swallowed hard, knowing he was too far gone in his panic to speak any louder. If he could just get up or throw a pillow, maybe then he could get Donnie's attention. Raph's body had gone rigid, though. There'd be no waking Donnie.

His fingers flexed painfully on something hard. His *phone* . His phone was still in his hands. His eyes flicked downward to see it there in his lap. It looked a thousand miles away. His fingers felt like they'd been cast with cement. The effort of navigating away from his text with Casey left him in a cold sweat, and finding his conversation with Mikey through the tears in his eyes had nearly been impossible.

Raph was sure he had done harder things, that there had been more difficult tasks than this. He could not think of a single one, though, as he lifted his thumb. It was just four letters. Just four stupid little letters that his stupid fucking thumb took ten fucking years to type.

Raph:

help

There. Raph had tried. Knowing he'd done all that he could, Raph let the phone fall from his grasp. He let *everything* fall from his grasp. The world around him was fading fast. He knew he ought to be a little more startled by his bedroom door flinging open, a little more relieved to feel Mikey grabbing

his arm, and a little more comforted by Mikey's voice in his ear. He ought to be a lot of things right now, but Raph instead, Raph was nothing.

–

"Mikey, I swear, he *told* me to go back to sleep!"

"And you *listened?* Dude, he's a fucking *mess* right now! He doesn't know what he can and can't handle!"

"He–he sounded so sure, though."

"Yeah, and he sounded sure he could go shower by himself last night, too. God dude, what were you fucking *thinking?* "

"I'm sorry, okay? I just–I don't know–I didn't want to *baby* him. He's probably so fucking embarrased by all this already–"

"Yeah, and now he'll be even *more* embarrassed that he checked the fuck out again! We can't let this happen!"

"We can't stop him from making his own choices, either! How's he gonna get better if we don't let him have like, *any* say in things? You know how much he fucking hates the tracker. I still can't believe he didn't *kill* me for that."

"Oh, so you thought leaving him alone and letting him have a panic attack was gonna make it up to him?"

"*Mikey*. Come *on*, man! Don't act like *you* have any better idea of how to handle all this shit. We are both *just* as fucked right now."

"...I know, *I know*. Fuck. I'm sorry, Donnie. I'm just… *so* freaked out. Seeing him like this *really* freaks me out."

“Me too. It’s like when he was, y’know…all drugged up in the hospital. Not moving or talking or anything.”

“This fucking *sucks.* ”

The talking stopped. Raph had only barely been listening, not really absorbing what his brothers were saying. He’d registered the angry tone, Mikey apologizing for something, and then silence. He didn’t care what they talked about, he just wanted them to keep talking.

“Mmf,” Raph grunted.

“Raph?” Mikey gasped. Raph felt a dip in the mattress beside him. “Dude, Raph, are you…back?”

“D’I go s’mwhere?”

“...yeah,” Donnie said thickly. Raph blinked sluggish a few times before he could see his brother standing in front of him. “Yeah, you were uh…gone for a little bit.”

“Oh,” was all Raph could say.

Slowly but surely, Raph’s awareness trickled back. He was once again so tense that he felt like a bow string, and he wondered if his jaw would ever stop feeling sore from being clenched so much. Maybe if he moved a little, he could loosen up a bit. The moment Raph tried, however, a horrible wave of dizziness overtook him.

“Oh shit!” Donnie exclaimed, rushing to keep Raph from tipping forward off the bed. “Oh man, Raph, what’s wrong?”

“Light…lightheaded,” Raph panted.

“Wait, did you eat last night?”

Raph had to think about it, but he was pretty sure he hadn't. He started to shake his head, instantly being filled with regret as the room spun.

"Fuck," Raph hissed, clapping a hand over his eyes to try and fight off the dizziness. Donnie was right; Raph needed to eat something. There was no way he was making it to the kitchen right now, though.

"Desk," he grunted, hoping that would be enough instruction for his brothers. After a moment of rustling from the other side of the room, Raph felt something pressed into his free hand. Finally opening his eyes, he was surprised to see that it wasn't one of his drawer snacks, but one of Marty's cookies.

"Oh," Raph said stupidly. He'd completely forgotten about these. "The…the others are for you guys."

"Just eat, dude," Mikey said softly to his left. Raph fumbled with the saran wrap, his fingers unsteady and uncoordinated. Mikey took it from him, unwrapping it quickly before shoving it back into Raph's hands. He thought he should probably be embarrassed (something about being babied?) but he was too tired and hungry to think about it very hard.

"I'm gonna go get you some real breakfast and something to drink," Donnie said. "Mikey's gonna stay, okay?"

"Mmm," Raph hummed in distracted confirmation as he bit into the cookie. Fuck, this was delicious. Marty was the fucking *best* .

Raph wasn't sure how he found the self restraint not to snarf the whole thing in a few bites, but he knew better. He needed to take this slow. It just so happened that eating slowly and deliberately to not make himself sick *also* doubled as a grounding technique. He remembered how silly he felt when Dr. Hart taught him this one. When he'd first started seeing her, he'd never imagined therapy could sometimes include a fucking *snacktime*.

But just like the breathing exercises, Raph had found this one had been easy to pick up. Both he and Leo had been known to go a little overboard in training as they got older, and they'd been lectured by Splinter more than once for getting sick afterwards by drinking and eating too fast. Raph knew it was probably weird to enjoy the memory of Leo puking up a hastily-drunk sports drink, but it brought a weak smile to his lips nonetheless.

“Feeling better?”

Mikey must have been watching Raph like a hawk to notice him smiling.

“Yeah,” Raph said breathily. Maybe ‘better’ wasn’t the right word, but he was definitely coming down from the attack. “Still hungry but…yeah.”

“Good,” Mikey said softly. That was all he said until Donnie returned with a couple of homemade breakfast sandwiches and drinks. Raph’s mouth watered at the sight of it, glad it was something more substantial than yesterday’s bowl of cereal at Casey’s.

Now Raph really had to focus on not eating or drinking too quickly. He sipped at the Gatorade, absently wishing it was orange instead of red, and watched his brothers cast each other awkward looks as they ate their own sandwiches.

Oh, right. They’d been arguing, hadn’t they?

“You guys okay?” Raph finally asked after everyone had finished and he himself felt a little less like passing out.

“Yeah,” Donnie said quickly. Raph watched him wince as Mikey pelted him with a balled up paper napkin. “I mean, yeah, but also…we gotta like, talk about something.”

“...alright?” Raph said, not meaning to sound so nervous.

“Okay, bro,” Mikey said assertively beside him. His little brother had been sitting so close that their knees touched as they both sat cross-legged on Raph’s bed. Mikey scooted over a few inches and repositioned himself so he was now angled toward Raph. He clasped his hands together and pointed them at Raph. “Last night you told me to be honest with you, but I think I gotta be like, *brutally* honest for a sec. Can you handle that right now?”

“Only one way to find out, I guess,” Raph answered, trying to sound humorous but mostly just coming off as weary. “Lay it on me.”

“Wait,” Donnie interjected. “Ok, first, let’s just like, establish the fact that Mikey and I aren’t like, throwing in the towel here or anything, okay?”

“…okay.” Raph echoed, feeling more and more apprehensive about where this was going.

“I’m serious. I’ve thought a lot about what you said,” Donnie told him, quiet and subdued. “The night before the anniversary. About how hard you’ve been working. And I think that you’ve been doing *all* the work. Mike and I are worried, and—"

“*Just* worried?” Raph interjected skeptically. He knew it might not be the right moment to tease Donnie, but Mikey had already confessed last night that he was scared.

“Yeah, *okay, okay*. We're freaked out and scared, too. *Happy,* asshole?” Donnie admitted, rolling his eyes a little in annoyance at Raph’s needling. Raph snorted with a tiny smile.

“But it’s not fair that you’re doing all the work yourself. Me and Mikey are gonna step up, okay? You shouldn’t have to do all this on your own.”

“Right,” Mikey agreed. “We’re still gonna do whatever we can, dude. But I meant what I said last night…I don’t know what to do, and Donnie doesn’t either. We’re just *not* equipped to handle whatever’s going on with you right now.”

“I’m sorry,” Raph said, and Mikey instantly shook his head.

“Raph, I love you, but I *swear to god* if you apologize for all this one more time, *I’ll* be the one having a meltdown,” Mikey quipped.

“What Mikey *means*,” Donnie interjected with a scowl at Mikey, “is that we know you wanna feel all guilty or whatever, but you shouldn’t. We just don’t know enough about this stuff to be super helpful.”

“…you are helping, though.”

“Dude, how many panic attacks or like, *almost* panic attacks have you had in the past 48 hours?” Donnie asked.

Raph couldn’t form an answer. He couldn’t even look Donnie in the eye.

“See? We’re here for you, but we just aren’t enough, Raph,” Donnie said plainly with a shrug.

“Last night you said you wanted to ‘deal with this’ with Dr. Hart,” Mikey said. “Please don’t blow up on me here, okay? But dad knows what’s up, and he called her to make you a like, emergency appointment for today.”

Raph couldn’t stop himself from dropping his head into his hand. He wasn’t angry. His brothers were right. Whatever the fuck was happening to him, it was beyond what they *could* or *should* deal with. Dr. Hart was a professional, and she’d been handling Raph’s shit for years now. He hated it, but there was no denying that Raph needed her help right now.

He rested his elbow on his knee and breathed in through his nose. He was just so fucking tired. How was he going to make it clear across town like this?

“…what time?” Raph finally asked.

“2 pm,” Donnie supplied.

“So I got…” Raph started, checking the time on his phone, “I got a couple hours to get my shit together enough to go out in public and make it all the way to SoHo. No fucking problem…”

“We don’t have to take the subway,” Mikey said. “We can walk. If we leave soon, we could make it there on foot underground.”

“...what? *We?* ”

“We’re going with you,” Donnie said as if it were obvious.

Raph whipped his head over to look at Donnie. They were *what* now?

“I mean, not *go in* with you. Just like, walk you there,” Donnie added hastily.

Raph continued staring at him.

“Unless you like…want us to?” Donnie asked uncertainly.

“*Fuck* no,” Raph hissed emphatically. A weak, hysterical little laugh bubbled out of him. “Oh my god, I’d rather—holy fuck, thanks, but *no.”*

“Yeah, okay, cool,” Donnie chuckled weakly, looking monumentally relieved.

“You guys have been extremely fucking cool about all this, and I seriously appreciate it, but—”

“No, no, I get it,” Donnie interjected. “I’m sure it’s like, really hard and awkward and shit. I just, y’know…”

Donnie sighed and stood up. He wrapped his blanket over his shoulders and shuffled across the room to sit on the only unoccupied part left on Raph’s bed. He looked at the floor as he spoke.

“We would do that, if you ever wanted us to. We know we haven’t…always done the right thing, or made things easier for you and stuff…And I really don’t wanna set you off or anything, but I’m fucking serious that Mikey and I are in this for the long haul now, okay?”

Raph wasn’t sure what to say to that. His gut reaction was to push back. This was *his* shit, *his* problem. His stomach lurched when for the second time since last night, the phrase “holding them back” drifted through his thoughts. He wasn’t sure where he’d heard that recently for it to keep cropping up like that, but did that really matter if it was true?

But Raph knew he wasn't going to make it through this alone. He couldn't even walk down the hall by himself. He needed help, and he wanted it. He didn't want to be alone. He would have to figure out how to get Donnie and Mikey to leave eventually, but that…well, that could be a problem for another day.

"Thanks, guys," Raph finally said.

They had only traveled what would have been a few city blocks above ground before Mikey snapped at Raph.

"*Stop. Apologizing.* "

"Sorry!" Raph said without thinking, and Mikey threw a crumpled soda can at Raph's head. He dodged before growling, "This is just so stupid!"

Mikey stopped where he was several paces ahead of Raph and Donnie. A beam of light from a sewer grate was shining down into the sewer, highlighting Mikey's grumpy face as he stalked forward towards Raph with arms akimbo.

"Do you want to get on the subway right now?" Mikey said impatiently.

"...no."

"Do you want to walk on the *surface* right now?"

"No."

"Do you want to get in an Uber and give the driver the chance to take a photo of where he lets us off so he can sell it to TMZ or post it on Twitter or whatever?"

“*Fuck* no.”

“Then shut up and let us walk you to your fucking therapist, Raph!” Mikey said, throwing up his hands, turning on his heel, and continuing to march down the sewer.

“*Holy shit*,” Raph chuckled nervously despite the situation. “Maybe *you* need therapy, Mike.”

“I will if you don’t stop making such a big deal about this!” Mikey called from further down the tunnel. Shit, he was moving fast.

“Just give it up, man,” Donnie laughed beside him, shaking his head a little as they picked up the pace. “You know how he gets. There’s no winning with him like this.”

“But you are all stubborn, in your own ways.”

It had been a while since Raph had remembered something Splinter had said and found it *comforting* . Maybe the rest of them weren’t as bad as him, but Raph appreciated that his brothers could also be spectacularly pigheaded at times. He just wished Mikey hadn’t picked *today* to show it.

As much as Raph hated putting his brothers out like this, it was hard not to be grateful for the gesture. There was absolutely no fucking way Raph would have made it there on his own today. It wasn’t just that being on his own was obviously out of the question; Raph could hardly stomach the idea of being around anyone but his brothers right now. He had no choice but to see Dr. Hart, but literally any other human? No fucking thank you.

Casey might have been an exception, but Raph’s stomach churned each time he thought about him right now. He still hadn’t responded to Casey’s text, and it was eating him up to think Casey might feel like he was being ignored after sharing something so heavy.

But each time Raph thought about getting his phone out to text back, he froze up. Why was Casey’s text setting him off like this? Why had he spiraled so badly when Casey had told him that he nearly died?

“Hey,” Donnie said with a gentle nudge of his elbow into Raph’s side. He hadn’t realized that he had stopped walking. “You good?”

“Y…yeah, sorry,” Raph said softly, hoping Mikey wouldn’t hear.

“Just tell us if you need to like, take a break or something,” Donnie told Raph, who nodded as they resumed walking.

“I’m good,” Raph mumbled. Mikey clearly hadn’t heard, still many yards ahead of them scouting the best route.

It was strange to see Mikey in the lead like this. Before Splinter had let them explore the surface at night, this had been the only way they’d traversed the city. Of course back then, it had always been Leo out in front checking their path. It had been years since they’d traveled this far underground, and Raph was surprised by the odd sense of nostalgia he felt as they walked. He could almost hear Leo’s voice, calling back to them with an “all clear!” or news that a passage ahead was too small or too dangerous.

“Man, this is weird,” Donnie muttered softly beside Raph after a long while of walking in silence. “Kinda feels like we’re little again or something.”

“Was just thinking the same thing,” Raph chuckled. “Think Mikey’d be up for doing a Leo impression to really sell it?”

Donnie tripped over nothing, and Raph looked over at him in confusion. Even in the darkness, Raph could see how strange Donnie’s expression seemed.

“Sorry,” Donnie mumbled. “That just…caught me off guard.”

“What?”

“Raph…listen,” Donnie started awkwardly. “You’re not ready to talk to dad, right? Well I’m not ready to…joke about Leo.”

“Right,” Raph sighed. “Right…sorry, Donnie.”

They continued on in silence for a few awkward moments before Donnie actually laughed.

“Man, how does this whole *being-honest-about-feelings* thing suck so much but also make me feel so much better?”

“S’pretty insane, right?” Raph laughed back, thankful that the tension between them had eased so quickly. “Getting stuff off your chest is the fucking worst, but it feels pretty fucking good, too. If Dr. Hart had told me two years ago that I’d actually *appreciate* therapy sometimes, I’d have laughed her outta the building.”

“So you don’t totally hate it?”

“Sometimes I do,” Raph sighed. “And sometimes it’s not so bad.”

“How do you think it’ll go today?”

“I don’t know,” Raph answered truthfully.

“Yo!” Mikey yelled back at them from far ahead. “I dunno what’s so interesting back there, but pick up the pace, guys!”

“Geez,” Raph snorted at Mikey’s pestering. “Good thing dad didn’t make *him* the leader.”

“*Dude,* ” Donnie hissed. “What did I literally just say?”

“Fuck,” Raph cursed. “Fuck, Jesus, I’m sorry Donnie.”

Donnie heaved a sigh, then clapped a hand on Raph shell as they walked.

“S’okay. We’re gonna mess up sometimes, right?”

“Right,” Raph agreed, glad he had been so easily forgiven.

It wasn’t much longer before they’d made it to the underground space beneath the office. Raph had needed to lead the way for the final few blocks, familiar as he was with his secret way in and out of the building. His brothers squeezed through the gap Raph had found so long ago, finally finding themselves in the basement.

“So, uh,” Raph started, unsure how to proceed. Thanks to Mikey’s persistence, they’d arrived exactly on time. “She’s just a few floors upstairs…”

“We’re walking you to the door,” Mikey said, leaving no room for arguments.

“Okay,” Raph said, trying hard not to think about just how painfully awkward this all was. They climbed the service staircase and made their way down the hall to Dr. Hart’s office door. “…I dunno how long this is supposed to be for, so like…go do whatever, but…maybe don’t go too far?”

“We won’t,” Donnie assured him. “Just text or call when uh, when you’re done or ready to go or whatever.”

Raph turned to reach out for the doorknob, but was stopped short by Mikey’s arms wrapping around him.

“Sorry,” Mikey mumbled into Raph’s jacket.

“For what?” Raph asked, taken aback by the unexpected hug.

“I don’t know,” Mikey answered, words muffled in Raph’s clothes. “That I was such a jerk on the way here. That you feel so shitty right now. That you have to go do this. That you’ve been doing this all along. That we never walked with you here before…I don’t know. I’m just sorry for everything.

Raph and Donnie made eye contact while Mikey's face was buried in Raph's chest. Somehow, Raph understood that Donnie's pained look meant he felt the same.

"Yeah…me too, Mikey," Raph finally responded. "Thanks."

Mikey pulled away and looked up at Raph with watery eyes. Raph took the doorknob in his hand and turned it. Just before stepping through, he couldn't help but crack a grin at his brothers.

"I'll try not to talk *too* much shit about you guys."

Raph snorted as he heard a muffled but good-humored "fuck you!" from Donnie on the other side.

"I see you're not the only one in the family who loves a good f-bomb."

Dr. Hart was behind her desk, smiling wryly at Raph.

"The sound proofing in this building is good, but it's not *that* good."

"Sorry," Raph said, not feeling sorry at all. Maybe Donnie wasn't ready for Leo jokes, but at least he still had a sense of humor.

"Your brothers came here with you today?"

"Yeah, because I'm too fucking pathetic to do literally anything by myself right now," Raph grumbled. He stalked over to his usual chair and plopped down, all traces of his smile now entirely gone. Rather than look at Dr. Hart, Raph glared out the window.

Raph caught his own angry reflection in the glass, and grew frustrated with himself. Today was not the day to let his usual grumpiness over the start of a therapy session take root. Things couldn't continue like this. His brothers needed Raph to sort this out with Dr. Hart. Raph needed it, too. He was going to have to work with her today. Raph breathed, letting his temper settle.

“I did your homework,” Raph said after a while, finally feeling like he could speak without anger.

“Oh? And which homework was that?”

“The ‘focus on friendships’ one,” Raph said, making a sad attempt at a laugh with a weak huff. “In fact, I think I deserve some extra credit points.”

“Is that so?” Dr. Hart asked with a soft chuckle. Raph appreciated her playing along.

“Yeah. I focused on friendships so hard that I made a whole ass new friend.”

This time, Dr. Hart’s laugh was genuine.

“Alright, let’s hear about this new friend.”

“His name’s Casey. He transferred to Eastman a few weeks ago.”

“How did you meet him?”

“He’s a friend of Tim’s,” Raph explained. “I guess they used to play hockey together as kids. He’s on a Junior League team now, which I guess is like, a step up from playing for a school or something? I’m not really sure how it works, but he says that’s like, a path most players take on the way to going pro.”

“He sounds very motivated.”

“I mean, I think he’s gotta be. He’s not, y’know…super well off. His mom has a job, but I guess it doesn’t pay great. And his dad’s not in the picture. He’s trying to get a scholarship and play for a college team.”

Raph didn't know why he was telling her all this. College was a dangerous topic, and he'd been doing his best to avoid talking about it with her. He had been doing his best to brush it off every time she tried getting him to talk about life after graduation, but Raph knew she wasn't stupid. She'd attempted to broach the subject more than once, and Raph understood that it couldn't be brushed off much longer.

"He's from Brooklyn," Raph said, shifting away from Casey's college ambitions. "And not the okay part, I guess. But I dunno, he's pretty cool. We've been hanging out a lot after classes. Texting and stuff. He invited me over to his apartment yesterday."

"That's great, Raphael," Dr. Hart smiled. "It's been a while since I've heard you talk about spending time with friends outside of school. It's also been a very long time since you've told me about forming a relationship with someone outside of your usual friend group or the wrestling team."

"I mean, I only met him because of Tim…" Raph trailed off with a shrug. "But I don't know. It's been…it's been cool. And like…he's just really easy to talk to. I mean, it's almost kinda *scary* how much we just…clicked."

"Why do you think you two get along so well?"

Raph couldn't help but snort in amusement and smile at that. He almost wanted to tell her that they very much had *not* gotten along in the beginning. But given that punching Tim was what had landed him in therapy, he knew better than to throw Casey under the bus. Plus, they'd made a deal that Raph had no intention of reneging on.

As he thought harder on Dr. Hart's last question, Raph's smile morphed into a grimace. He knew the answer. It had been becoming more and more obvious the longer they talked, but this morning's text had all but solidified Raph's suspicions.

"He, uh…I think he might be…kinda like me."

"In what way?"

Raph couldn't look at her.

“Like…messed up.”

The words hung in the air. Weak and roundabout as it was, this was as close as Raph had ever gotten to verbally agreeing with his diagnosis. But Raph *had* to agree now, didn’t he? After everything that had happened, it was impossible for him to not see that something was clearly very, very wrong.

Raph half expected her to lecture him about his choice of words, that calling yourself “messed up” was on some stupid therapy ‘no-no’ list or some shit. He had least thought she’d stop the conversation about Casey to address the fact that he’d *finally* acknowledged his diagnosis.

Raph was surprised when Dr. Hart seemed to gloss over it entirely, instead continuing with the topic of his new friendship with Casey.

“What makes you say that?”

“We were in the locker room while I was getting ready for practice, and he saw my scar,” Raph said, gesturing halfheartedly to the right side of his chest. He still wasn’t looking up at her, choosing instead to focus intently on the pattern of the carpet. “And then he showed me his.”

“Did he tell you what happened?”

“Not at first,” Raph said, shaking his head a little. “And I didn’t ask, because like, I’d *just* met him, y’know? But we started hanging out and talking about stuff, and he’s like…I don’t know, he’s *weirdly cool* about everything. I feel like he just…gets it.”

“But he did eventually tell you?”

“Yeah, when I was at his place yesterday, but I didn’t even *ask* . I wasn’t going to, because it…it fucking *sucks* that everyone knows. That everyone saw it. That you can just Google it and watch it on fucking *YouTube* .”

Raph ground his teeth and grunted in frustration. That was *not* where he meant to go with this. They were talking about *Casey* . He sighed and redirected himself.

“But he just fucking *told* me!” Raph said, suddenly feeling agitated and confused. “Like, I’d literally just said he didn’t have to, and then he did anyway! I mean, he didn’t tell me the *whole* story, he just said he was stabbed by some gang members because he wouldn’t join up with ‘em, and that’s why he and his mom moved here. And he texted me again this morning saying thanks because I promised I’d show him some self-defense stuff, and he just–just *throws* it out there that he almost fucking *died* when it happened!”

“I see,” Dr. Hart nodded. “What did you say to him when he told you that?”

“*Nothing*,” Raph ground out. “I haven’t answered yet. He probably feels like an ass about it, too. He like, apologized for oversharing. And I don’t know why I didn’t answer. I don’t know why I didn’t tell him that…that I—”

Raph’s throat constricted. His pulse jumped, and his fists clenched tightly. Fuck. *Fuck!* Why? *Why* was this happening again?!

Raph’s head snapped up to finally meet Dr. Hart’s eyes. He hoped she could see it, hoped she understood, because he couldn’t tell her, he couldn’t form the words, he couldn’t—

“Alright, Raphael,” Dr. Hart said. She was in front of him now. When had she moved? “I’m going to guide you through a 4-8-7, okay?”

Raph nodded jerkily. It had been a while since he’d needed her to walk him through such a basic breathing exercise. Raph could usually recognize when he needed to start and kick things off himself. He wondered just how bad he must have looked to have prompted Dr. Hart to leave her desk to come sit on the footstool in front of him. She began guiding him, and Raph clung to her voice like a lifeline.

With Dr. Hart’s help, Raph narrowly avoided the second panic attack of the day. He was grateful, he *was* . But all the gratitude in the world wouldn’t stop Raph’s aggravation at having come so close yet again.

“I fucking *hate* this. I don’t *understand* this.”

Raph instantly regretted allowing his frustration to boil over like that. Raph knew what Dr. Hart thought was causing this. He’d heard it straight from Splinter that Dr. Hart believed this was Raph

finally starting to believe that Leo was gone. Raph wasn't sure he'd be able to handle it if she took the conversation down that avenue right now. He'd have to cut her off before she tried.

"I don't feel any different about Leo. I *don't*," Raph snapped. "So why is this *happening* to me?"

"I do not believe this is about Leonardo, Raphael," Dr. Hart said.

"It's *all* about Leo," Raph spat. "That's why I'm fucking *here* . I'm *here* because of what happened to *Leo.* "

"What happened to Leonardo was terrible," Dr. Hart agreed. "But that does not make what happened to *you* any less important."

"Yes it does," Raph whispered. "Leo didn't do anything wrong. *Casey* didn't do anything wrong."

Raph screwed his eyes shut. He couldn't look at her as he said this.

"But I did," Raph said, weakly jabbing at his chest. "So it *doesn't matter* ."

"It does matter, Raphael. What Casey told you upsets you so much *because* it matters."

"*I don't believe you,* " Raph shot back in a low hiss. It was childish and pathetic, but he couldn't stop himself.

Dr. Hart knew what happened. Everyone knew. Everyone had seen. So why didn't she understand? Why did she think he was *anything* like Casey? Like heroic, selfless Leo?

You were selfish…You put everyone else at risk…you could have gotten people killed.

Raph couldn't remember who had said that, or when. It had probably been his dad, and most likely at the hospital sometime during the…when he hadn't been able to…when he…

“Raphael,” Dr. Hart said, somehow gentle and urgent at the same time, bringing Raph back to the present.

“You just don’t fucking *get it*,” Raph growled. “You wouldn’t say *any* of that shit if you did.”

“I would like to understand, if you would like to help me,” Dr. Hart said. This time, Raph *did* believe her.

He’d never done this before. He didn’t *want* to talk about it. He had *never* wanted to talk about it. They’d gone over bits and pieces here and there, but Raph hadn’t ever gone over the entire thing start to finish. But maybe if he did, maybe if he took her through it, maybe if he told her everything, maybe *then* she’d finally fucking understand. She’d understand that he’d deserved it. She’d understand that it didn’t matter.

“Can we—” Raph halted, swallowing hard. His hands were clenched into tight fists inside his hoodie pocket. He was hunching forward, shoulders drawn up, trying so hard not to curl in on himself. He forced himself to keep going. “Can we talk about it? The…the parade?”

Raph’s eyes stayed fixed on the floor. He almost hoped she’d say no, that today wasn’t about that, that they needed to focus on why Raph was suddenly incapable of being left alone and having panic attacks left and right. Instead, he heard a soft intake of breath before she answered.

“Where would you like to start?”

Chapter End Notes

Hi. Holy shit. I am SO SORRY that I teased on twitter/tumblr that this chapter would contain the parade flashback.

I tried. I really, really, REALLY tried. But this chapter was getting way too long, even with only including the first half of the flashback. I was already over 13k words for just this one chapter with the first half of it included and it wasn't even finished, so I removed it. I'm sorry, but the flashback is just going to have to wait until the next chapter 😭

The good news is there's already a bunch written that I had to take out of this chapter, so you won't have to wait so long again for the next update 😅

I also have the world's longest content warning/author's note to write before the flashback. I really want to make sure its right before rushing into it.

Huge thank you to @halfshellman on Tumblr for this amazing comic of a scene from Chapter 7!

Another huge thanks to @bluefireflyz on Tumblr for this awesome piece in an ask!

Chapter 16: The Parade - Part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



2023

Raph rolled his eyes as a human awkwardly weaved her way around him. It had been a couple months since they had defeated Superfly and entered the human world, but heroes or not, the humans of New York still hadn't quite gotten used to the sight of them walking around on the surface.

By the time classes had let out for summer break, all of the kids at school had more or less gotten over the sight of their strange new classmates. Out here in the rest of the city, though, there was no shortage of startled looks. Raph tried to keep in mind that there were *millions* of people in the city, and that every day might be someone's first day seeing them in person. New Yorkers were a generally unfussed group of people, rarely even batting an eye at a passing celebrity, but Raph had to admit that it was probably difficult to just casually ignore a 5-foot-somemthing talking turtle.

He wondered if he would ever get used to the stares. The attention was fun…to an extent. Raph didn't enjoy it nearly as much as Mikey and Donnie, and Leo absolutely *hated* it. The way Leo balked at nearly every human interaction had been fairly entertaining at first, but Raph had to admit that was starting to feel a *little* sorry for him.

"Sorry!" Leo squeaked as the woman shuffled past him, too. It was a pretty tight squeeze for all four of them in the tiny lobby of their local post office. Raph had almost volunteered to wait outside, but with how much fan mail and gifts they'd been receiving, they usually wound up needing as many hands as possible when checking their new PO box.

Sure enough, the clerk that had greeted them heaved an entire plastic tote box of mail onto the counter. Mikey grinned as he slid it toward himself to peer inside.

"Whoa! This is even more than last week!"

"You boys might have to start coming a little more often! We've upgraded you to the largest box size, but we're still having to use these for overflow," the clerk chuckled, patting the side of the tote.

"Sorry, someone posted our PO Box number online," Leo apologized, as if he didn't say this every single time they picked up their mail.

"Hey, it's no problem!" the clerk laughed then said with a wink: "Anything for the world's most fearsome fighting team!"

Raph groaned while Mikey burst out laughing. The four of them had been given a slew of nicknames and slogans by the public, each one somehow cheesier than the last. Raph's least favorite was 'heroes in a half shell'. It didn't even make any fucking *sense!* They weren't a fucking *oyster bar*.

"Thanks, man!" Mikey beamed as he began shoving the mail into the reusable fabric bags they'd brought. There was only enough room for two of them at the tiny front counter, so Raph turned to join Donnie at the community notice board on the opposite side of the lobby. Donnie was perusing the flyers for local activities and events, and Raph watched him take out his phone to take a photo of one.

"Anything good?"

“There’s a family block party in a couple weeks,” Donnie told him, pointing to the flyer. “Maybe we can get dad to go, since it’s in the evening.”

Splinter *had* been making an effort to spend more time on the surface and around humans, but Raph understood that it wasn’t exactly easy for him. He and his brothers still didn’t know much about his life pre-mutation. Their dad has always been vague about it, saying it was difficult to remember things since he’d been just an animal at the time. From what little they did know, though, it was clear that it hadn’t been all that great.

Now that Raph could see the way humans treated pests on the surface, it was even easier to appreciate why his dad had always been so terrified of humans. Making eye contact with an exterminator leaving a building with traps full of dead rats one day on their way home from school had probably been the single most awkward experience of Raph’s life.

Raph had to respect his dad for how he was putting himself out there now, even if most of his excursions to the surface only happened at night. Raph knew that having the option to slip away into the cover of darkness was one of the few reasons Splinter had found the courage to leave the Lair.

“Oh, good idea, Don,” Raph nodded. According to the flier, the party didn’t start until dusk.

“Okay, we have everything. Let’s head home,” Leo said, approaching Raph and Donnie with a couple of bags held out for them. Raph took one for himself and led the way out of the post office and onto the street.

A grin split Raph’s face as the early summer sun hit him. Wearing just a t-shirt and shorts, Raph felt the warmth in his limbs and knew his brothers were feeling the same satisfying tingling on their skin. Their mutation had made them warm-blooded like humans, but there was no denying how the natural sunlight triggered something in the back of their reptilian brains. It had been almost startling to learn just how incredible the daytime felt once they’d no longer been restricted to visiting the surface at night. These days, Raph wasn’t sure how he’d ever survived without it.

Their time in the sunlight was short lived, however, the post office being just a quick walk from home. They made a pit stop at the nearest bodega, where the massive shop owner Marty declared Leo his favorite customer for being so polite. Raph rolled his eyes, which instantly earned him a “least favorite” designation.

After picking up a few things, they made their way through a manhole cover and back to the Lair. The mayor—who was *apparently* their new best friend—had offered to help them with housing above

ground. The thought had been too much for Splinter, though, who had graciously but adamantly refused.

Raph had been frustrated about it at first, but as he touched down onto the familiar sewer floor, it was hard not to be glad Splinter had turned the mayor down. So much had changed in the past few months; enrolling in school, making human friends, becoming "legitimate" citizens, going to real doctors and dentists for the first time in their lives (who had been horrified but impressed by the homebrew braces Mikey sported courtesy of Donnie). With so many brand-new experiences happening almost every day and the constant attention from humans, sometimes it was nice to be able to come back to the private and comfortable familiarity of the Lair.

"We're home, dad!" Raph shouted upon entering. Splinter smiled at him as poked his head around the kitchen corner.

"Did you remember the—"

"Doritos? Yeah," Raph chuckled, pulling the chips out from one of the grocery bags.

"Ah, thank you, Raphael," Splinter said, absently patting Raph's forearm before eagerly ripping the packaging open. Raph snorted while he set the rest of the groceries down, then headed toward the dining table. Along with his brothers, he dumped the contents of his mail bag out, then sat down to begin sorting.

Raph appreciated all the fan mail, but *holy fuck* did this always take forever. Most of their talk show appearances had happened shortly after Superfly's attack, but they still regularly received inquiries from all sorts of productions. They'd even just recently done a promo spot for the American Ninja Warrior competition, and they always saw an influx of mail after an appearance on TV like that.

Raph grabbed a handful and started ripping open envelopes. It was the standard fare. The majority of their mail usually consisted of notes and drawings from kids, followed by letters from grateful New Yorkers. Every once in a while, they'd get one from a teacher requesting some sort of letter from the turtles addressed to their class. They got the odd piece of hate mail now and then, which Mikey liked to read in stupid voices for the rest of them to laugh at.

"Aww, this one's pretty cute," Leo said, flipping a piece of paper over to show the others. It was a kid's drawing of the four of them fighting a giant scribbled blob that Raph could only assume was meant to be Superfly.

“Uuuugh!” Donnie groaned. “Why’d he draw my head like that?”

“Probably because he’s *five* , Donnie,” Leo laughed.

“*You* don’t look like a melting Funko Pop! It’s like he actually made an *effort* drawing you,” Donnie groused.

“Yeah, and you always get like, *way* more of these than us. What’s up with that?” Raph asked Leo indignantly.

“It’s the swords,” Mikey declared to the table at large. “They’re easy to draw. None of ‘em *ever* get my chucks right, and Raph always looks like he’s holding salad forks.”

“Oh, it couldn’t *possibly* be because they think I’m *cool*,” Leo huffed in annoyance.

“But a bo staff is way easier to draw than swords,” Donnie said, ignoring Leo.

“Yeah, but it’s just a stick! That’s not as fun to draw!” Mikey argued.

“Remember that one where the kid drew Leo stabbing Superfly in the eye?” Raph laughed as he ripped open another piece of mail. “The giant puddle of blood you were standing in was a *great* touch.”

“*Eugh.* Yeah, that one did *not* make the wall,” Leo grimaced, gabbing a thumb over his shoulder toward his bedroom.

Much of the Lair expansion was still being worked on, but the boys had all moved into their newly finished individual rooms a few weeks ago. While the rest of them only kept a handful of drawings for themselves (and mostly just the funniest ones), Leo had plastered almost an entire wall’s worth up in his room.

“Y’know, you don’t have to do that. None of those kids are ever gonna know that you hung their drawing up,” Donnie snickered.

“Well, maybe I’ll make a Twitter account and post about it so they will.”

“Yeah right, dude,” Donnie laughed. “The day you make a Twitter is the day Raph starts *meditating* with you.”

“I think you’re just scared I’ll end up with more followers than you,” Leo shot back with a wry grin. “I mean, you guys said it yourselves; I *am* the most popular.”

“Yeah, with *grade schoolers*,” Mikey cackled.

“Please. I’ve watched Donnie’s streams,” Leo rolled his eyes. “It’s not like his Twitch chat is any more mature.”

The horsing around over their fan mail continued. Donnie received yet another piece of kpop merchandise he fawned over for way too long. A couple of tickets to a standup show were addressed to Mikey. Raph waved Splinter over when he found a few obviously meant for their dad. They were nearly finished when Raph spotted one last package that hadn’t been opened near Mikey.

“*Yoink*,” Raph laughed, reaching over the table to snag it before Mikey could.

“No! That was the last fun one! Now all I have left are super boring looking ones!”

“Hey, you always hoard the ‘fun ones’ dude,” Raph told him. “A few boring ones won’t kill you.”

“These are *so* boring, though! I mean look; this one’s from *Macy’s*. So lame,” Mikey mumbled as he tore open the letter.

“Maybe they’re trying to tell you something, you fashion disaster,” Donnie quipped. Mikey balled up the letter’s now-empty envelope and pelted Donnie in the face with it.

Mikey was conspicuously quiet while he read the letter, but Raph was too preoccupied with the package he'd stolen to immediately notice. Someone had sent them some weird homemade turtle dolls. The more Raph looked, the creepier they seemed. Man, he *should* have let Mikey open this one.

"Oh my god, oh my god, *oh my god*," Mikey began muttering from across the table.

"Oh man, was I right?" Donnie asked. "Is that a warrant for your arrest from the Fashion Police?"

"No," Mikey said, not even reacting to Donnie's teasing. "Oh my god you guys, it's from the *Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade!* They're inviting us to ride on a float this year!"

"They want us to *what?!* " Leo sputtered. "That's for like, celebrities and stuff!"

"Yeah I dunno if you noticed, Leo, but we're kinda like, *super* famous now," Donnie deadpanned, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder to the fridge. Their dad had plastered every single inch with press photos, newspaper clippings, even magazine covers, all featuring the brothers and their new status as heroes.

Smack dab in the middle was an enlarged photo of each of the boys and other mutants receiving Bronze Medallions from the mayor, New York's highest citizen award for service to the city. The talking heads on the news were even still debating if the *president* would award them with something, but that definitely wouldn't be happening until the ink had dried on all their new, very official citizenship documents.

"This is *awesome!* " Mikey said, his smile so large Raph could see every single one of his braces.

"No it's not," Leo groaned. "You guys know I hate all this stuff!"

"It can't be worse than when we got invited to host SNL," Donnie argued.

"God, don't remind me," Leo mumbled from behind his hands.

“Oh, I’m gonna be reminding you of *that* trainwreck until the day you die, dude,” Raph grinned maliciously, punching a red-faced Leo on the shoulder. Raph had needed to physically drag Leo out onto the stage that night. He’d given it his best effort, but the internet had *not* been kind about Leo’s stiff and less-than-enthusiastic performance.

“That might be sooner than you think if you guys keep making me do these things,” Leo mumbled.

“C’mon, Leo!” Mikey said. “It’s not *that* bad! We’ll be up on a float, so you won’t even have to talk! Besides, we gotta enjoy the hype while it lasts!”

“*Eugh*,” Leo threw a hand over his eyes as he groaned once more. “Are you guys *sure* you wanna do this?”

“Dude, it’ll be *great*,” Raph laughed, gripping Leo’s shoulders and giving him a lighthearted shake. “Just think about it this way; if SNL was rock bottom, there’s nowhere to go but up! Plus, I kinda think all this stuff’s been good for you!”

“Yeah, you’ve really been *coming outta your shell*,” Mikey quipped, eliciting groans from the rest of the table.

“*Boooo!* ” Leo heckled, finally uncovering his face to give Mikey a dramatic thumbs down.

“With jokes like that, I’m surprised SNL even let you through the *door*,” Donnie scoffed in disgust.

“Since my comedic talents are wasted on you Philippines—”

“Oh my god. Phili*stines*, dude,” Donnie corrected, looking at the ceiling in dramatic exasperation.

“—phili-*whatevers*, I’m gonna go tell dad about this!” Mikey finished, waving the invitation in his hand. He ran off, leaving the three of them with the rest of the boring mail. Raph didn’t mind as much as he would have otherwise, because he was excited, too. They’d wanted to see this parade since they were kids, and now they were going to literally be in it. This was going to be fucking *awesome.*

A few hours later, Raph found himself knocking on Leo's brand-new door. It was still weird seeing the entrance to their old room sealed off, and it was even weirder having to knock to enter a room that had once also been his. Nevertheless, Raph waited until he heard Leo yell for him to come in from the other side.

It was strange to see how much bigger the room looked without Raph, Donnie, and Mikey's things, but not quite as strange as seeing one of the walls covered in kids' drawings. He found Leo sitting on the floor with a fresh stack of them, seemingly trying to find a place to squeeze the new ones in.

Raph took a seat on a footstool a few feet from Leo. It was the same one they'd set Leo's phone on when they'd first called April with their scheme to win the humans over by taking down Superfly. It felt like ages ago that they'd been huddled around the phone together as Leo explained the plan. With how much had happened, it was almost hard to believe it had only been a few months since that call.

"What's up?" Leo asked, holding the pile of artwork in his lap to look up at Raph. Leo looked nervous, and Raph knew his brother must've picked up on his own apprehension over the conversation he'd come here to have.

It was almost *scary* how easily Leo could clock someone else's feelings. Raph had always felt like Leo was overly observant, but he'd chalked it up to Leo taking his role as the leader a little too seriously. Splinter had given him the job of keeping his brothers safe on the surface, after all. It only made sense for Leo to have developed such a keen awareness of his surroundings. Raph half expected Leo to let his guard down now that they were no longer under constant threat of discovery, but the focus of his endless fretting only seemed to have just shifted to their new human peers.

On the one hand, Raph was glad to have a little room to breathe without feeling like Leo was watching his every move. On the other, sometimes it was a little painful to watch Leo direct his older sibling energy toward their classmates. Even though it had all worked out, Raph *still* internally cringed thinking about Leo walking up to that asshole on the football team a while back. Raph had been so sure Leo was walking straight into trouble. Turned out the kid's mom really wasn't doing well and actually *appreciated* Leo checking on him.

Right now, though, Leo's intense awareness was focused entirely on Raph, and it was obvious Leo knew something was up. For both their sakes, Raph just needed to get it out there in the open.

"Y'know, if you really don't wanna do the parade thing, I can try to talk Donnie and Mikey out of it for you."

Raph had thought about it for a while after they'd finished opening their mail. Raph might not have been as perceptive as Leo, but he wasn't *completely* dense. Not only had Leo's lighthearted mood evaporated after Mikey read the parade letter, but Raph had watched out of the corner of his eye as Leo's body language became stilted and withdrawn. When they'd finished with the mail, Raph had seen the way Leo's shoulders had tensed up as he shuffled off to his room with his new stack of kids' drawings.

The longer Raph had sat with it, the guiltier he felt for teasing Leo about the SNL hosting fiasco. It wasn't Leo's fault that he was…the way he was. Leo had been a spectacularly good sport through all of this, but he clearly wasn't enjoying it the way the rest of them were. Raph thought maybe it was time to cut Leo a break here.

"Oh," Leo said softly after Raph's offer. Raph had known this conversation might be a little awkward, but he was caught off guard by the look Leo gave him just then. His brows furrowed minutely, and Raph had *no idea* what Leo was looking for as his eyes narrowed ever so slightly to focus on Raph's face. Raph tried not to squirm, feeling a little like he'd been put under a microscope or something.

"…so? What do you think?" Raph finally said, unable to withstand Leo's odd scrutiny any longer.

"Uh, that's okay, Raph…" Leo said uncertainly. Leo let out a soft sigh and rubbed the back of his neck, his unsettling little inspection of Raph apparently over. "Besides, I think you might be right."

"Huh? About what?"

"About doing stuff that makes me uncomfortable being good for me. I really want to get over being so…y'know…" Leo trailed off, bringing his hands to hover a few inches out from the side of his face and shaking them a little.

Raph didn't even need the pantomime to understand what Leo meant.

Raph's plan hadn't been to try talking about Leo's… *issue* when he knocked on Leo's door. They'd never really talked about it. The more time they all spent on the surface, though, the easier it became to recognize that Leo's collection of *personality quirks* almost certainly had a clinical name. Tons of posters had sprung up around the school during Mental Health Awareness Month at the end of their freshman year. It had been hard to miss how some of it had hit a little too close to home when it came to Leo.

Raph hadn't ever really broached the subject with Leo. With the way Leo had talked a little louder or walked a little faster in the halls when passing those posters, Raph had thought it wouldn't be welcome.

Raph didn't understand what it was, but sometimes when it was just the two of them, he and Leo could actually just *talk* about things. When it was the four of them, Leo was almost always in leader mode, and Raph would be on Mikey and Donnie's side about nearly everything. But when Raph was alone with Leo, there was no leader. They were just…the same, somehow. Equals.

But Raph couldn't tell if this meant Leo wanted to actually talk about it. Even if he'd trailed off and let his gaze fall back on the colorful papers in his lap, this was the closest they'd ever come.

Raph wasn't sure he remembered a time before Leo was like this, but he *did* remember when it suddenly became impossible to ignore. Leo was still looking down at his pile of drawings, so Raph stole a glance over at Leo's katanakake. The polished wooden stand sat on top of Leo's dresser, both katanas resting in perfect symmetry atop it.

From this distance, Raph couldn't make out the words etched into each hilt. He didn't need to read them to know what they said, though. He already knew their names. In fact, Raph had a reminder of the day they'd earned those names on his chest. Raph just barely resisted the urge to trace the old X-shaped scar with his fingers.

Rules had made the first cut. Consequences, the second.

They could have filled a dump truck with the amount of shit Raph and his brothers had given Leo over *naming* his swords. And not just over naming them, but naming them *those* names specifically. They'd all thought it was just so fucking dramatic. Even Raph thought it was a bit much, and *he* was the one walking around with a permanent souvenir from Leo getting a little too cocky and careless during a training session.

"Leonardo," Splinter had lectured after cleaning Raph's then-fresh wound, gripping the sheathed katanas as he addressed Leo. It was the angriest Raph had ever seen him. *"These are **dangerous** . These are **deadly** . All of your brothers' weapons can kill, but yours can kill the most easily. There are **rules** for how you can use them, and there are **consequences** for when you do not follow those rules."*

Splinter had kept the swords, and Leo had been back to wooden training bokken for two months; one month for each cut. Leo may have gotten the swords back after his punishment was over, but his confidence did not return with them. Raph was physically stronger than Leo, but Leo had always been far more skilled. Raph was pretty sure Leo had been trying to prove a point, that Raph's superior strength didn't matter if he could get his swords *that* close to Raph's neck. But Leo had underestimated the distance between Raph and the tips of his katana, and even years later now, Raph could still remember the terrified look in Leo's eyes as he realized it too late.

After that, Leo's… *stuff* began ratcheting up. With how Leo could hardly even look at him for weeks after it happened, Raph felt like *he* was being punished, too. Even with the bokken and Raph's repeated assurances that it hadn't even really hurt, Leo had refused to train with him. Instead, he spent hours running katas alone, or pouring over all the instructional material Splinter had collected over the years.

One night, Raph even found him in the living room watching some of their old kung fu movies, sitting *inches* from the screen. Raph had only gotten up for a glass of water, but stopped to stand next to Leo as he paused, rewound, and played a section of the tape again.

"You do know they're not really even full-on hitting each other, right? They're just stunts," Raph had said, sleepy and exasperated.

"I know," Leo had mumbled, not tearing his eyes away from the screen as the scene played again. *"I'm trying to figure out how they do it without actually hurting each other."*

"Why? What good's pulling your punches in a fight?"

That had gotten Leo to finally turn away from the TV, and Raph had been startled by the intense way Leo looked at him. His eyebrows had been pinched, an unhappy grimace on his face as he nodded at Raph's new scar.

*"I am **never** doing anything like that **ever** again."*

"It's not a big deal."

"It is," Leo had hissed.

"Leo, just chill out—"

"I can't!" Leo had practically shouted. *"I **can't** chill out! Not about this or—or—or **anything!** "*

"C'mon, it's—"

"You guys don't get it, so just—just drop it, Raph!"

Raph had gone back to their room after that, angry and frustrated. He really *didn't* get it…but he did what Leo had asked and dropped it. It had taken more self-restraint than he thought he even had, but he stopped bothering Leo to spar with him for a while. The next few weeks had been nothing but one-on-ones with Mikey or Donnie, Leo training only with Splinter.

Whenever it was Raph's turn to take a break while Mikey and Donnie paired up, he would watch as Leo slowly but surely developed his new fighting style. It was meticulous, disciplined, and *extremely* non-lethal.

It had taken more than a little coaxing from Splinter, but after months of honing his new technique, Leo finally started sparring with Raph again. Raph had been frustrated at first, because he had preferred it when training against Leo had been a little more dangerous. But seeing the worried concern in Leo's face and the too-tight grip on his swords after their first round, Raph had decided to begrudgingly accept this new reality. Even if it would never be like it had been before, Raph had just been happy to have his favorite sparring partner back.

It had been a couple years since then. Leo might not have wanted to talk about not being able to "chill out" back then, but maybe *now* he did. Raph sat patiently on the footstool in Leo's room, watching as Leo seemed to wrestle internally with himself on the floor. He fiddled with the edge of one of the drawings, clearly feeling a little uncomfortable.

Maybe he wasn't ready. That was okay, because Raph wasn't sure *he* was ready for that, either. He and Leo might have this strange, unspoken agreement that they could talk about things when it was just them, but Raph knew talking about *this* would still be awkward as hell. Raph decided to try sparing both of them and move the conversation along.

“I know you’re are, but I dunno if you should like…force it or whatever,” Raph said uneasily. “And I dunno, this just hasn’t seemed very fair. You keep agreeing to all this stuff because it’s what *we* wanna do.”

“I like seeing you guys happy,” Leo shrugged, shooting a small grin up at Raph. “It’s fine.”

“Is it?”

Leo’s smile faltered.

“…yeah, it is,” Leo said, and Raph cocked a brow at the unconvincing tone. “Plus, Mikey was right.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think Mikey has been right about literally anything ever.”

Leo tossed his head back and laughed.

“I mean about the whole *‘enjoy it while it lasts’* thing,” Leo explained, still chuckling a little. “Like, we’re never gonna be *normal* normal, but people are gonna probably get used to the whole mutant-slash-hero thing eventually. Plus, there’s like, so much we can go do now that we’ve never been able to. I don’t think we should turn things down while people are still offering to let us do a lot of this stuff for free.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, I thought you didn’t *like* getting all this free shit!”

“I mean, I *do* feel weird about it, especially since we’ve been, y’know, literally *stealing* from humans for so long…” Leo grimaced. “But isn’t it the ninja way to take advantage of all possible opportunities?”

“Oh my *god*,” Raph groaned with a laugh. “Seriously, leave it to you to make this about *‘the ninja way’*, you freakin’ *nerd*. I think you’re just saying that because you wanna use those Disneyland tickets we got sent.”

“I’m saying it because it’s the correct tactical choice!” Leo defended, but he was still grinning. “And I don’t *want* to go to Disneyland, Raph.”

“No?” Raph said skeptically, remembering the way Leo had almost vibrated out of his skin when their previous trip to the post office had resulted in an envelope full of free theme park tickets.

“No, you don’t understand, Raph,” Leo said, looking at Raph with a serious expression. “I don’t ‘want’ to go to Disneyland; I *need* to go to Disneyland.”

Raph cackled, enjoying the way Leo joined in after a beat. Like the ninja he was, Leo had fully taken advantage when Raph created the opportunity to pivot the conversation away from Leo’s…. *Leoness* Raph wasn’t too worked up about it, though, because Leo was right. They had so much to look forward to now, and Raph was excited to experience it all to the fullest.

And experience it they *did*. Their plan to stop Superfly might not have gone exactly how they’d envisioned, but Donnie had been right about the “overall fanfare” that would follow their victory. Now that school was out for the summer, their schedule was packed with appearances they’d had to put off until classes were over. They were flown out to Los Angeles for a few talk shows and commercial shoots. Somehow, they still managed to find time to use those Disneyland tickets.

He had felt a little silly walking around decked out in matching merch with his brothers, but Raph had to admit it was worth it to see Leo so happy and relaxed. More than once, Raph caught Leo excitedly waving his hands down by his sides over something, and Raph thought maybe the stupid ears he was wearing really weren’t so bad after all. Raph didn’t really get it, but something about the place appealed to his brother in a way that *Leo* hadn’t even been able to explain.

Mikey had found his *own* happy place in Hollywood, and Raph thought his smallest brother might explode when they were given not one, but multiple private studio tours. Donnie had forced them all to spend an entire morning in Little Tokyo, followed by an evening in K-town that ended in some *violently* purple ube ice cream.

Even after the trip to California was over, the parade had been put out of their minds for months. It was hard to think about something so far in the future, especially with another school year quickly approaching. Since they’d started late into the spring semester as freshman, their sophomore year would be their first full year of school. It was exciting being part of the back-to-school madness. They all dove back into their schoolwork and extracurriculars, and before they knew it, Thanksgiving had come.

Well, really the day had just *barely* come. The parade was set to kick off at 9am, and the turtles had found themselves up in the wee hours of the morning in order to get to the staging area at the beginning of the parade route by their call time. Raph was an early riser, but even *this* was a bit much for him.

They'd been emailing with a parade coordinator named Sophie back and forth for a while now, and had been instructed to meet her that morning for their credentials. They'd just made it to their designated meeting spot when they heard someone calling for their attention.

"Boys, good morning!" a woman with dark rimmed glasses greeted, waving them toward her.

"Sophie?" Leo questioned as they approached, and the woman nodded.

"So glad to finally meet you four!" she smiled, setting her coffee down on the ground to reach into her bag. She pulled out four lanyards with huge, neon green badges dangling from the ends. "These are for all the talent riding on the floats, so security knows you're part of the show. But since the production wanted you guys to bring your weapons, I'm going to escort you through each checkpoint until we get to the staging area."

"*Each* checkpoint? There's more than one?" Donnie asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. With how many incidents there's been at other events over the past few years, security's been dramatically increased this year."

"Yeah, we've been watching this on TV since we were kids and I don't really remember seeing *these* ," Mikey told her, pointing toward the row of barriers lining the street.

"You're right," Sophie nodded, motioning for them to follow as she talked. "I've been part of this event for decades, and this is definitely the tightest it's ever been. Usually spectators can watch from wherever and come and go as they please, but this year there's designated viewing areas cordoned off with these new fences."

"Yeah, these look, uh… *sturdy*," Donnie said as they walked along the fencing. Each section of fence looked almost like a concrete highway barrier, with the addition of a large sheet of glass extending out from the top.

“They’re a brand-new type of high-security event barrier. I think they’re a little intimidating, but I suppose that’s part of the point,” Sophie laughed softly with a small shrug. “The bases are so heavy that they can’t be moved without a piece of equipment, but that makes it harder for anyone to ram through them with a vehicle and into the crowd.”

“And the glass?” Raph asked.

“That’s some crazy new type of plexiglass. They told me the name of it, but I can’t remember,” Sophie said, waving her hand dismissively. “It’s meant to prevent anyone from climbing over, and its bulletproof.”

“Holy sh— *crap*,” Donnie said, just barely cutting off the curse. Leo scowled at him disapprovingly before he continued. “That’s gotta be like, crazy expensive.”

“From what I understand, the company that developed them is using this as a sort of showcase. They’re hoping other cities see how safe it makes public events, so they place orders for their own. The NYPD got a pretty good deal on them, I hear. I think it’s all a bit much, and it definitely makes *my* job a little harder.”

“Sorry,” Leo said.

“Oh don’t be!” Sophie laughed. “I don’t mean to complain! I’ve just been doing this for so long, it’s a little sad to see where we’ve ended up now. I shouldn’t let all the new security take the fun out of this, though. I just need to remember that it’s worth it to make sure we put on a fun *and* safe event!”

Sophie led them through a series of checkpoints. Despite having been informed that yes, the turtles were bringing their weapons, and yes, it was approved, it took what seemed like way too much time to make it through. After they finally made it past the final checkpoint, Sophie was practically having them jog toward a series of parked trailers.

“Okay, here we are,” Sophie said a little breathlessly. “Your dress suits are inside, and each of you has a tie to match your bandanas, of course. Let me know when you’re all changed, and I’ll come in and give you the run-through before we head to the float.”

It had taken more than a little cajoling to get Mikey to head inside, excited as he was to try and spot any other celebrities who were also in the parade. They changed quickly, the excitement amping up as they helped each other fasten their color coordinated ties. Leo let Sophie in, who wasted no time in getting them up to speed.

"You guys'll be on the third to last float," Sophie told them after going through what Raph thought was *way* too many logistics of the parade. "The last two floats are Christmas floats, the finale float being—"

"Santa's Sleigh!" Mikey cut in. "Oh my gosh, we get to go right before Santa!"

"That you do! It's a big deal, you guys are basically his warmup act. There's gonna be a lot of kids out on the street for the end because they're excited for Santa. This is also statistically the period of the parade with the highest viewership, so here's my advice; don't wear yourselves out early on in the parade. Save some energy for waving and smiling as your float approaches the Macy's building."

Leo was listening with serious intent, as if trying to commit all of Sophie's words to memory.

"Don't worry," she smiled at Leo's obvious nervousness. "I'll be in the broadcast trailer with the director and producers, and I'll be in your ear the whole time."

She tapped her headset, and Raph reflexively reached up to touch the earpiece he'd been given. They all had one under their bandanas. Leo adjusted his nervously as Sophie led them out of the trailer and towards their float.

"I'll be giving you updates when you're getting close to being on camera, and I'll queue you when it's time to really ham it up. Sound good?"

"Yes, ma'am," Leo answered seriously. Sophie was approached by another coordinator for a moment, and the boys were left to themselves to wait. Donnie immediately started playfully jabbing Leo with his elbow.

"Yes ma'am," he mocked in a gravely tone. "Dude, it's a *parade* . It's supposed to be fun! Chill!"

“I’ll chill when this is all over,” Leo groaned, eyes darting around at the chaotic scene. Sophie rejoined them and brought them to a…sewer and trash themed float. Jesus, was that a *fake dumpster* ?

“Sorry, boys,” Sophie winced. “Trust me, most of us are painfully aware of how tasteless this is. But it’s kind of hard to stop the creative team once they’ve got an idea…”

“It’s okay,” Mikey laughed. “I mean, it’s definitely on brand!”

Raph wished he had as good a sense of humor about it as Mikey, especially when he saw the dancers that would be accompanying their float. Each one was dressed in green with bulky foam shells. Mikey and Donnie burst out laughing at the sight of them.

Sophie showed them how to get up and onto the float, but explained that things wouldn’t kick off for a while longer and that they were welcome to wait on the ground until they got the call. Once she left them for the production trailer, Raph nudged Leo.

“Yo, you wanna just go ahead and climb up there now?”

“I don’t wanna be *lame* …” Leo mumbled. He nodded toward Mikey and Donnie, who had headed toward the group of dancers. “They’re pretty into this.”

“Honestly, *I’m* less into it than I thought I was gonna be. Let’s just head up there,” Raph shrugged. Leo was looking more and more uncomfortable by the second, and Raph was starting to feel pretty guilty for not following his gut all those months ago. He should’ve talked his brothers out of this, but it was too late now. At the very least, Raph could get Leo up and away from the crowd for a while before the show started.

They climbed up and onto the float, making their way up toward the topmost platform where they’d be standing for the parade. Raph sat down on the edge and let his legs dangle over the side, Leo following suit. They sat there quietly together, watching giant balloon after giant balloon be slowly inflated in front of them. Their brothers were goofing around with the performers on the street below. Mikey was trying to show them how to spin on the ground on their fake shells, and one of the dancers pretended to get stuck upside down.

“Man, I can’t decide if that’s like, offensive or not,” Raph chuckled. “Like is that… *species-ist?*”

Raph had to admit it wasn't a great joke, but Leo didn't react at all.

"Yo, space case," Raph nudged him. "Earth to Leo."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. There's just like, a lot going on," Leo mumbled distractedly.

"Out there? Or, uh…in there?" Raph asked, nodding at Leo's forehead. Leo laughed a little, and Raph was glad that at least *this* joke had landed.

"Both, I guess," Leo chuckled softly. He was quiet for a moment before going on. "Hey, Raph…Do you think like, maybe we could talk when we get home?"

"What? If you wanna chew me out for something, just get it over with, dude. We've got time to kill."

"No! No, it's not anything like that," Leo said, waving his hands anxiously. "It's just, uh…something *weird* has been happening, and I wanna pick your brain about it."

Oh, shit. Raph sat back to look at his brother. This wasn't a Leader Leo Lecture, but a Leo-and-Raph-are-just-brothers conversation. Now *Raph* was the one feeling nervous.

"Weird? Weird like how?"

"I'm not really sure. And I don't know…maybe I'm crazy or just making something out of nothing, but I think…" Leo paused before continuing in a small voice. "I think there might be something wrong with me."

Raph wanted to tease him and say of *course* there was, where should he even start? Looking at the nervous tension in Leo's shoulders made Raph think better of it, though.

"…y'know, I thought something might be up."

Leo looked startled.

“Wait, really? What uh, makes you think that?”

“I just mean you’ve been kinda quiet recently. Hanging out in your room by yourself and stuff. I kinda felt like we were getting on your nerves or something.”

Raph had noticed it a few months ago, but it had been happening more and more frequently as of late. He knew Leo could get overwhelmed by stuff sometimes, and Raph thought his brother was finally embracing the privacy of having his own room to go decompress.

“Oh. Sorry,” Leo said, and Raph could’ve sworn he looked a little disappointed for a second. “I didn’t mean to make you think that. I guess I thought if I could just be alone long enough to sit and think, maybe I could figure this out but… *ugh*, maybe that was the *opposite* of what I should’ve done, because now I think it’s *worse*.”

Whatever it was, Leo seemed pretty worked up about it. Raph knew coming here hadn’t been Leo’s first choice, but he still wanted his brother to at least try enjoying the day. Raph knew Leo well enough to understand that wasn’t possible if he was stewing over this until they got home.

“You uh, wanna talk about it now?”

“No. It’s…*complicated*, and I wanna have more time to like, try to explain it right. It can wait,” Leo shrugged. “But thanks, Raph. It’s nice that...”

Leo trailed off, looking a little embarrassed.

“What?”

“S’dumb,” Leo said, rubbing the back of his head self-consciously.

“C’mon! Spit it out, dude,” Raph teased gently.

“I know it drives you crazy that I’m not like…as confident about stuff as you, but it’s just nice knowing that you got my back anyway. I seriously don’t think I could do any of this stuff without you guys.”

“I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit, man.”

“What?”

“I mean, I dunno what it is, but you seem like, *way* more chill about shit. Like, for a while now, actually.”

“Oh,” Leo said, blushing a little. “I’m um, glad you think so.”

“All that meditation bullshit finally kickin’ in? You visit the *spirit world* yet, Avatar Leo?”

Leo’s blush deepened, but he cracked a smile as he covered his face with one hand.

“Oh my god, Raph,” Leo laughed. “I hate you so much.”

“*Hate*, Leo? *That’s* not very monk-like! What would the air benders say? Tisk tisk, brother!”

Leo laughed from behind his hands.

“But hey, seriously,” Raph said. “I don’t really get it, but if that shit helps you be less, y’know…”

Raph gripped the sides of his face in his best Kevin McCallister impression. He grinned when Leo laughed, glad his brother was more amused than offended.

“And you’ve like, seriously been putting yourself out there. Everyone at school is eating that shit up. At this rate, you’re gonna be Prom King or some shit.”

“I’m not like, *trying* win everyone over,” Leo blushed a little and rubbed the back of his head again. “S’just hard to ignore it when I feel like it’s super obvious someone like, isn’t doing great or something…”

“Only obvious to *you*, Mr. Emotional Support Turtle,” Raph cackled.

Raph expected Leo to blush even harder, maybe even roll his eyes at him. Instead, he was met with an unsettling, scrutinizing look.

“What?” Raph winced, feeling strangely exposed. It was a moment before Leo answered.

“Y’know, I thought maybe that you *were* starting to get it, but…” Leo trailed off.

“Dude, *what?”* Raph chuckled in confusion at Leo’s odd statement.

“…you really don’t feel it, do you?”

Raph was just about to ask what the hell Leo was on about when his earpiece crackled to life.

“Alright boys,” Sophie’s voice came over the line, tinged with a slight electric hum. “*We’re kicking off in a few. Time to get situated.”*

It was only a few minutes after Mikey and Donnie had climbed up onto the float that everything started happening at once. Performers got into formation, bands started playing, balloon carriers let the balloons up into the air, and the floats began moving.

The first few blocks of the route were a blur. Raph’s face almost hurt from how much he was smiling, and he knew his brothers had to be feeling the same. Less than a year ago, the thought of ever getting to do something like this would have seemed impossible. Raph had been so sure they would live their entire lives in the shadows, the humans above them never knowing they even existed.

And yet here they were, out in the sunlight. The eyes of thousands of humans were on them. The people on the sidewalks below were shouting not in fear, but in *adoration* . Every few yards, there were kids in colored bandanas and masks waving up at them. Raph spotted a little girl in a red bandana sitting on her dad's shoulders. Raph pointed at her, tapped his own headband, then gave her a smile and a thumbs up. She waved back so wildly she nearly fell off her dad's shoulders. Then she flexed her arms like a bodybuilder, just as Raph had done for the news cameras after defeating Superfly.

It was then Raph realized it wasn't just her bandana that was red. She had a cast covering her forearm and wrist, and the plaster was the exact shade of Raph's mask. She tapped it with her uninjured arm like Raph had tapped his bandana, and pointed back at him with the world's biggest smile.

"Dude!" Leo laughed, gripping Raph's shoulder and shaking him in excitement. "Oh my gosh, that's so cool!"

"What?"

"She picked your color because she wants to be like you!" Leo shouted over the din of the crowd below.

"What? Why?"

"Duh! She was probably scared when she broke it, so she wants to be strong and brave! Like *you*, dude!"

Holy shit. *Holy shit.* Raph suddenly felt like he understood Leo's wall of drawings. People didn't just appreciate that they'd saved New York; they actually looked up to them. They *inspired* them. This little girl had been hurt and upset, and somehow, *he* had helped her through that. Raph hadn't even needed to be there; just the *idea* of him had apparently been enough.

They'd heard the word "hero" so many times by now that it was starting to feel a bit stale. Raph felt like it had lost its meaning or something. Now, though, Raph knew that he hadn't even understood its *true* meaning to begin with.

Raph didn't have much time to take in the sudden epiphany, because Sophie was back in his ear.

"We've got a drone camera doing a flyby in ten seconds. Let's do a hero pose with the weapons, then give it a big wave, alright?"

Mikey took an obviously *great* amount of pleasure in following Sophie's instructions as the drone flew overhead. Even Leo played it up for the camera, and Raph felt himself grinning ear to ear as the parade continued. This was all fucking *incredible* .

Some time and many blocks later, a soft whirring sound filled the air. It was hard to make out over the noise of the bands and the crowd, but Raph felt like it was coming from above. He looked up to see a drone descending rapidly toward them. Hadn't they already done a drone shot, though? Sophie hadn't said anything about there being another later in the parade.

"Are we supposed to pose again, Sophie?" Mikey asked her through his earpiece.

It was several long moments before she replied with a simple and terse "*standby.* "

"Wait," Donnie said, squinting upwards. "That's not the same one from before."

Raph looked harder and saw that Donnie was right. It was still far above them, but it was clearly much larger than the drone that had taped them earlier. It was a dark, metallic gray, and something was mounted on the bottom of the main body. It looked like it *could* be a camera, but it was difficult to tell from this distance.

"Holy shit, what *brand* is that?" Donnie mumbled. "I've never even *seen* one like that before."

"*Raph*," Leo hissed. It was so quiet and low that Raph almost hadn't heard him. "Raph, something's *wrong*."

Before Raph could ask what Leo meant, Sophie's tense voice was in his ear.

"That's not one of ours."

The whirring grew louder, drowning everything out, as a dark swarm of drones rained down from the sky.

Chapter End Notes

(Please please **please** be sure to read the content warning and author's note in the next chapter.)

Re: the Disneyland bit. I know it's not officially canon (yet) that Leo is neurodivergent or anything, but I want to believe! I've worked for both Disneyland and Disney World, and while I have *plenty* of terrible things to say about Disney as a company, it's impossible to deny that the theme parks are the kind of place where neurodivergent people THRIVE. It's fun, safe, soft, and welcoming. Some of my happiest memories from working there are of seeing both kids and adults just fully embracing the magic of it all. I just feel like MM Leo would feel really, really happy and comfortable at a Disney theme park.

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Art by @halfshellman Tumblr

Chapter 17: The Parade - Part II

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING: Nobody is killed, but there is a **mass shooting threat** in this chapter. There will be depictions of panicked crowds, adults and children in extreme danger & distress, and mildly graphic flesh wound, and a graphic gunshot wound. Only Raph is shot, but background characters will suffer minor injuries in the chaos of the attack.

Author's Note: I wrote a super long and needlessly personal author's note, then deleted it. The gist of it was that I'm not trying to diminish the gravity of gun violence, school shootings/mass shootings, or acts of terror with some silly fanfic about ninja turtles. But because fanfiction is free and there are no publishers telling you what you can and can't write, this medium has always been a way for people to write about complicated and difficult topics.

I live in the United States, and mass shootings and school shootings are an unfortunate and terrible reality here. Some readers may have also lived through one or been personally affected by one. If you're not comfortable with reading this chapter but still want to continue reading the rest of the story, please leave a comment or send me a message on Twitter or Tumblr and I will write you a less stressful summary of this chapter. My Twitter is @ThePeakTMNT and Tumblr is @the-peak-tmnt

PS: ***Bold and italicized dialogue like this*** will be used for a certain character's scary voice. Emphasized words that would normally be italicized will be underlined for emphasis. I know that you're technically supposed to unitalicize for emphasis in this scenario, but my dyslexic brain cannot handle that for some reason, so I'll be underlining here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey," Donnie said, looking directly into the camera. "The author knows that nobody actually reads the chapter notes at the beginning."

"But this one has a content warning that's really fucking important," Raph chimed in. "There's some heavy stuff coming up, and the author needs to make sure you know what's up before you keep reading."

"Yeah, so please don't skip ahead before reading the author's note, okay?" Mikey said, pointing back up the page at the chapter notes.

Please go read the content warning.

"What the *fuck* is going on?"

Raph couldn't stop the curse word from slipping out, but Leo was too distracted to reprimand him for it. Their float had lurched to a stop. The giant balloons bobbed in the air as their handlers on the ground dug in their heels, ropes taught and straining against the sudden loss of momentum. Raph saw parade coordinators on the street waving their arms at performers and band leaders, shouting instructions to stop. In just a few short moments, the entire parade had come to a hurried and disorderly standstill.

Being so ubiquitous at events like this, Raph had barely even registered the countless police officers stationed on the street during the parade. Now, Raph watched as they quickly began to scramble. Nearly all of them had their hands on their radios and holsters as they fanned out into the street, frantically trying to assess the situation.

And what *was* the situation? What seemed *hundreds* of drones had descended on the parade route. In every direction, Raph saw drone after drone hanging in the air above the endless crowd. Before they appeared, Raph had been focusing so hard on the crowd that he hadn't realized their float had reached Times Square. An oppressive hum filling the air as the whirring sound of the drones' propellors reverberated off the surrounding buildings.

Like his brothers, Raph had at first thought the drone zooming toward them was just another camera for the live TV broadcast. Now, however, Raph could see that Donnie was right. This drone was *nothing* like the one from before. It wasn't just that it didn't look like any other drone Raph had ever seen; it didn't look like *any* piece of technology Raph was familiar with.

The dark metal the drones' bodies was so sleek that they looked practically seamless. Raph couldn't spot a single screw or bolt holding any of it together. The propellors were encased in protective rings, and Raph could only guess that the two small cylinders on either side of the main body were the muzzles of internally housed firearms. A quick glance over at his brothers told Raph they were all thinking the same thing; these things had *no* obvious weak points.

Raph had been preoccupied with the one that had come to hover in front of their own float, but he finally tore his attention away long enough to look around. Panicked had yelling joined the hum of the drones. Within just a few moments, everyone on the street seemed to have collectively realized that

this was *not* part of the show. The drones descended so quickly that the people below hadn't had any time to react, and now the drones hovered at the exit of each fenced off viewing area.

It didn't take a genius like Donnie to see what was happening; the security barricades were completely useless against the drones, which were free to move not just overtop of them, but in any direction. With the drones blocking the exits, everyone was trapped. The people in the crowd had been corralled by barricades like cattle.

Raph saw a few people try to make a break for it. The confused yelling escalated to screaming as warning shots rang out, bullets from the drones hitting the pavement just inches from the feet of those attempting to flee. The crowds surged like a wave, people clamoring backwards toward the barricades lining the street. The screaming worsened as the crowds condensed, and Raph's stomach lurched as he understood why. As people closest to the drones kept trying to retreat backward, the people along the barricades were being crushed by the push.

Some began trying to scale the plexiglass of the barricades, but the smooth surface made it impossible. Raph watched as the cops and performers on the street swarmed toward the barricades and began trying to wrench them free of their positions. Not a single barricade would so much as budge.

"The bases are so heavy that they can't be moved without a piece of equipment," Sophie had told them.

Fuck fuck ***fuck!*** Whoever was doing this had to have known about the new barricades, because they were using them to their *advantage*. The entire scenario had been designed to leave no options for escape. Raph felt his pulse quicken as the hopelessness of the situation washed over him.

"They can't move them," Leo hissed urgently. "Guys, we gotta—"

Leo's orders were cut off as the nearest drone surged forward. A red targeting dot appeared on his chest, and Leo froze in place. The message was clear; move, and the red dot would be replaced with a bullet hole.

More shots rang out as the drones fired on the parade balloons, and Raph watched as they began deflating rapidly. The volunteer handlers wrestled with the ropes, trying to keep the enormous balloons from crashing onto the trapped crowds. Light as they seemed while inflated, the speed of their decent was a stark reminder that they were made of several hundred pounds of tarp and rigging.

A few cops and performers jumped in to help, but the massive inflatables were coming down too fast. A brightly colored character from a kids show Raph had never seen careened into a lamp post. The fixture snapped and fell, just narrowly missing a handful of people still struggling to bring the balloon down onto the street.

The sound of the gunfire at the balloons sent the already panicking crowd into full on chaos. In the havoc below, Raph saw man pressed against the barricade holding his wife's legs steady on his shoulders. The boost gave her just enough height to push her young son over the top of the barrier. He fell into the waiting arms of a performer, who collapsed to the ground from the weight of the impact. The performer recovered quickly and scrambled to her feet, clutching the boy to her chest as she ran with a limp for the cover of a parade float.

"*Fuck!*" Raph yelled, unable to keep it inside this time. The desperation of the situation felt like a physical weight on Raph's chest. Seeing parents give their child to a complete stranger to give him the chance to survive was just *too fucking much*. And *fuck*, there were *so many* kids here! They'd spent the entire parade waving to *hundreds* of them. Raph thought about the little girl from blocks ago wearing his colors. He hoped the bandana was still enough. He hoped she was still being brave.

"We can't just stand here!" Raph bellowed, one hand already on the safety railing of the float. He was ready to vault up and over it when the drone targeting Leo zipped around to target *him* instead. Raph felt a hand on his elbow, and suddenly he was being yanked backwards. He staggered until his shell hit the fake themed sewer pipe of the float behind him. Leo was now between Raph and the drone, and his eyes were wide as he whipped his head around to face Raph.

"What are you doing?!" Leo yelled, a hysterical tinge to his voice. "That thing'll *shoot us* if we move!"

"Someone's gotta do *something!"*

"I know!" Leo shouted back. "We—we can't just run out there, though! Just—just gotta think of a plan—"

"Where the fuck are the snipers?!" Raph roared back, cutting off Leo's nervous rambling. He remembered what his dad used to tell them as kids why they couldn't come to the surface to watch. As they'd gotten older and started ninja-ing their way into things like concerts and sporting events, they'd all learned more about how to avoid hidden security. Most humans seemed to never even be aware how often snipers were present at large events providing overwatch. With how much Sophie had talked about the beefed-up security, there was *no way* there weren't some here right now.

“I don’t think they can’t risk it! They’ll probably *hit* someone,” Leo said, and Raph had to admit Leo was probably right. Everything was so chaotic that there if were indeed any snipers positioned in any of the surrounding buildings, whatever shot they took at any of the drones ran the risk of hitting someone in the crowd.

“What do we *do*, Leo?” Mikey asked, voice quivering.

If Leo had a plan, the rest of them never heard it. The countless screens in the square began to flicker wildly, eliciting another round of cries from the trapped spectators. One by one, every electronic billboard for several blocks blinked into darkness. The scrolling news chyrons went black, and the stories-tall digital advertisements became empty voids. The flashing bulbs of the marquis twinkled weakly before being extinguished. The last of the lights dying was enough to send the terrified crowd into a new wave of screaming.

“ENOUGH!”

A terrible voice — loud, foreboding, and guttural – echoed through the streets. The overwhelming sounds of panic and confusion fell, an anxious hush sweeping over the crowd. The voice seemed to have come from every direction at once, and Raph didn’t know which way to look as it once again boomed into the air.

“I tire of your willful ignorance.”

What…what the *fuck* did that mean? Raph looked over to Donnie, and almost imperceptible shake of his head told Raph that not even Donnie knew what to make of the statement.

“So desperate to find meaning in chaos—”

Raph looked to Mikey. His knuckles were white from the grip on his nunchucks, eyes flittering from one chaotic scene below to the next.

“—that you so readily <u>lie</u> to yourselves—”

Leo was closest to him, and Raph was near enough that he couldn't miss the way the muscles in Leo's face flexed as he clenched his jaw and swallowed hard.

"—and make heroes out of monsters ."

Suddenly, the screens burst back to life. Apparently, the drone hovering in front of Raph and his brothers *did* have a camera, because they were now surrounded by a live feed of themselves on every digital display in the square.

Unlike Leo, Raph had gotten pretty used to being on camera in the months since their victory over Superfly. This, however, felt too much like when the humans thought *they* were the villains during the Superfly attack. The voice had calling them monsters just as the humans had at first made Raph's blood boil. They'd risked so much and fought so hard to be accepted. They'd *earned* their place here on the surface. Raph knew there were people out there who would never accept them, and he'd made peace with the fact that there were people who would always think of them as freaks. But he wasn't about to let anyone call him or his family *that* ever again, not without a *fight*.

"We're not *monsters*," Raph growled, drawing his sai and settling into a fighting stance as he sneered at the drone in front of them.

"SILENCE!"

Three more drones zoomed toward the turtles' float. They came to hover just yards in before Raph, Donnie, and Mikey, their weapons trained on each turtle.

"Only the leader will speak."

Raph heard Leo's breath hitch before he tried to speak.

"What do you want?" Leo asked, awkwardly addressing the drone in front of him as if it were the man himself.

"To reveal the truth."

"…what truth?"

"The truth of humanity."

"…I don't understand," Leo said carefully.

"I would not expect you to, creature," the voice sneered.

"Look," Leo started, seeming a little bolder. "There's a lot of children here, please just let them go—"

"Children?"

A laugh that Raph could only describe as *unhinged* came through the speakers. The wild, deranged cackling reverberated through the square, and it made Raph's skin crawl. There was something about the voice that sounded so terrible and threatening that it felt almost *unnatural*. Raph had never heard anyone sound like that, not even his *extremely* unnatural mutated cousins. Surely this person was using something to modify their voice. There was no way a normal person could sound *this* intimidating.

The maniacal laughter ended abruptly, though it's echo still drifted ominously down the street. There was a tense, quiet moment before the voice spoke again.

"This country has long since proven it cares <u>nothing</u> for the lives of children."

"*I* care," Leo snarled back, jabbing a thumb into his chest as he spoke. Raph was behind Leo, but he could see the intensity of his brother's face on the screens around them. His teeth were bared in a fierce snarl, and Raph was startled by the look of absolute determination in Leo's eyes.



art by portableleo

Holy shit, Raph thought incredulously. He was immediately struck by the memory of their dad when he'd come to rescue them from TCRI. Raph always thought Leo was more like their dad than the rest of them, but mostly because they both had always been so afraid of humans. It seemed that wasn't the *only* way they were alike.

Raph wasn't able to dwell on it for very long. There was a beat of silence before the unsettling laughter was back.

"Do you, now?" the voice asked in a cruel, mocking tone.

The live feed of the turtles on the float was replaced with a much different shot of the four of them. In this one, they weren't alone. The rest of the mutants were there with them under a bridge. Raph realized this must have been April's footage from the night they went to confront Superfly in Bad Bernie's van. How the fuck did he *have* this?

"We don't work for Bernie," the Leo on the tape said. *"We're here to find you."*

"We know you're building some sort of super weapon," Donnie said next.

That…that wasn't right, though. Donnie hadn't said that until after the rest of the mutants were introduced, and only after Leo reminded them why they were there in the first place. They'd been so caught up in the excitement of meeting other mutants that Leo had needed to get them back on track with their mission.

The footage and audio had been *manipulated.*

Their backs had been to April while she was filming, so there was no way for anyone to see that Donnie's words didn't match with the movement of his mouth. Raph heard Donnie's sharp intake of breath and Mikey's small gasp, and Raph knew brothers had all just realized the same thing. Raph wanted nothing more than to call this fucker out for pulling such a dirty trick, but the red dot on his chest kept him begrudgingly silent.

"You were conspiring with the fly mutant to attack humans."

"No," Leo said instantly, but the ferocity he'd displayed just moments ago was gone. "No, that's—that's not how it happened! We already explained this to the cops, I swear! We were gathering information, trying to figure out what his plan was!"

Another of April's clips began to play, this time outside of the bowling alley.

"So what's up?" Superfly asked. *"You wanna roll with us? Cuz we can activate the machine tonight."*

Again, their backs were turned to April, and Raph's stomach dropped as the Leo on the tape spoke the wrong words at the wrong time.

"We are, in fact, very into your plan. It's like, great. I love the killing people part."

"No!" Leo yelled. "No, no, that's—*please*, you have to understand! We had to *play along!*"

The tape continued rolling, Donnie speaking again.

"S-fly my man, we'll drive the van with the storage unit, and you lead the way."

Donnie groaned weakly to Raph's right, and Raph wanted to fucking *kill* whoever was doing this.

"That—that's not what it sounds—" Leo had begun to fully spiral and flounder, and Raph and the others couldn't do anything to help Leo plead their case. "We—we—we had to *play along!* I swear, we *had* to so—so we could try to stop him! We wrecked the van on the way to his hideout because we were trying to—to get away with the last piece he needed!"

"Enough," the voice spat once more. "***Your justifications are irrelevant. Mutant or human, you deceived and manipulated those around you at every turn, and switched allegiances as it suited you. From the beginning, you acted purely in your own self-interest. Yet these people <u>venerate</u> you and parade you through their city."***

"It…it's true," Leo said, his voice wavering. "You're right. We were selfish. We only started looking for Superfly because we thought…we thought the only way humans were ever gonna accept us is if we helped them first. And it's true that we…we screwed up."

Raph watched his brother's grip on his katana loosen slightly with the admission, and Raph wanted to *shake* him. What the fuck was he *doing?!* Why was he *agreeing* with this fucking lunatic? The threat

of the drone in front of him was the only thing keeping Raph from reaching forward trying to knock some sense back into his brother. Just as he was trying to think of a way to get Leo's attention without triggering an attack, however, Raph saw Leo square his shoulders. On the screens, Raph could see something in Leo's face shift.

"But we could've stayed on Staten Island," Leo said. Raph watched his eyebrows draw together as he continued. "And we could've run when everyone was scared of us…when everyone *hated* us. We didn't know April was gonna tell everyone we weren't with Superfly. But we fought him anyway because people were gonna be hurt. People were gonna be *killed.*"

On the screens, Raph saw Leo's eyes flick downward. He could practically *hear* Leo was thinking. These people were in that exact sort of danger right now, and Leo was going to *do* something about it.

"You said you wanted truth," Leo said, eyes once again focused on the drone. "I'm…I'm not a human, but I *am* telling you the truth."

For a few seconds, Raph heard nothing but the muted noise of the crowd beneath the whirring of the drones. The unseen speakers suddenly exploded with sound, and it was all Raph could do not to flinch.

The mad cackling was back, much louder this time and *infinitely* more insane. The man, whose laugh was even more disturbing than his unnatural voice, was nearly gasping for breath after several long moments of uninterrupted laughter. It died down into a unsettling chuckle before the man was speaking again.

"I commend you, creature! Yes, yes, it seems I must answer your candor with my own!" the voice exclaimed, practically *giggling* as he spoke. ***"Indeed, I admit that I was most certain there was nothing left in this world that could possibly surprise me! How incredibly <u>interesting</u>."***

The crowd was growing louder once more, but the man made no attempt to silence them again. His attention appeared to now be on Leo, and Leo alone.

"Though, you must forgive me if I remain skeptical. After all, ninja are warriors of opportunity and deception, are they not?"

"That…that's true," Leo conceded. "But—"

"Quiet," the voice hissed sharply. ***"You've proven your words mean nothing. I will allow you, however, to prove yourself with action."***

Raph's thoughts were racing as fast as his heart. What the fuck did this guy mean? Leo could haved *died* saving the people of New York from Superfly. They all could have. What more could Leo possibly do to prove that he cared about humans?

"You will take their place."

"Okay."

Before Raph could so much as *begin* to process what Leo had just agreed to, he felt himself being shoved. Pain erupted in his head as the back of his skull connected violently with the fake sewer pipe of the float behind him. Momentarily dazed, Raph realized a second too late that his sai were being wrenched free of his loosened grip. His vision cleared just in time to see Leo diving toward Donnie and Mikey, a sai in each hand.

Stunned by both the blow to his head and the disbelief of what he was seeing, Raph watched as Leo charged their brothers. He spun in the air, and with one flying kick, sent Donnie and Mikey onto their backs. Leo pounced on them, bringing Raph's sai in a downward arc. For one terrible moment, Raph thought Leo had *stabbed* them. When his brain finally caught up, however, Raph could see that Leo had put the sai through the fabric of each of their jackets and into the floor of the float platform, pinning them in place.

"L-Leo, what—" Raph stammered, head still spinning, as Leo turned to now charge at *him*. Raph didn't even have time to get into a defensive stance before Leo crouched to sweep a leg at his ankles. Top heavy as he was, Raph crashed backwards as he was knocked off his feet. He only was stopped from ending up flat on his back by the fake sewer pipe behind him. His shell made contact with the pipe, and his head snapped back to meet it once more. Vision swimming, Raph winced at the glint of light above him. Sunlight reflected off Leo's raised katanas, blinding Raph as they plunged toward him.

The unmistakable sound of metal against metal met Raph's ears. He gasped, but had to draw his breath short as he felt a sharpness against either side of his neck. Blinking through the pain in his head, Raph's eyes came into focus to find Leo's katanas at his throat. His gaze traveled up the length of the swords to where his brother still gripped each handle.

Raph had never seen such a look on Leo's face. His teeth were clenched in a terrible grimace, his nostrils flaring as he took in too-quick breaths. Tears were gathering at the corners of eyes wide in terror. His hands shook as he released his hold on the katanas. They remained in place, the ends firmly embedded in the structure behind Raph.

Leo had trapped him here.

"I'm sorry," Leo whispered desperately.

Leo reached up to touch his earpiece, but Raph heard nothing coming from his own. They'd all been on the same channel with Sophie, but Leo was hearing something none of the rest of them could. Raph's stomach plummeted as the realization hit him. Like the screens in the square, Leo's earpiece had been hacked.

"Leo, whatever he's saying, don't listen. You can't—you can't *do this*—"

"I have to," Leo cut Raph off, his low and urgent. "It—it's the only way. He'll let everyone go if I—"

Leo stopped abruptly, bringing his hand to his ear again.

"What's he saying to you?!" Donnie yelled off to Raph's side. Raph could hear Donnie and Mikey struggling to free themselves, but Raph could not turn his head for fear of slicing his own neck open.

"You can't follow me," Leo said quickly. "What—whatever happens, you can't follow me. He'll shoot someone if you do. You just…you gotta just wait til the drones are gone to move, okay?"

"No," Raph growled. "No, Leo, this isn't—"

"I love you guys so much," Leo said thickly. "Tell Dad I'm sorry."

With that, Leo vaulted over the railing and leapt down onto the street below.

“Leo!” Mikey screamed. “Leo, come back! *Leo!*”

“No no no no no,” Donnie was murmuring rapidly.

“FUCK!” Raph howled. He stretched out his arms, but his fingertips stopped just short of the hilt of each katana.

He tore his eyes away from the swords to look down at the street. Drones were herding away the parade participants and cops to clear a path for Leo. Raph watched as Leo walked further and further down the street until he came to a manhole cover. Leo crouched down, lifted the cover aside, and disappeared into the darkness below.

“NO! LEO, NO!”

Donnie’s screaming and Mikey’s crying became easier to hear with the rapid departure of the drones. Raph could see the crowd below move en masse as the exits were cleared. Shouting escalated as people pushed to get out. Some were yelling for help, and handfuls of people rushed to aid those who had been injured in the chaos.

It was all white noise to Raph. A strange sensation of clarity had washed over him as he stared at the void where his brother had vanished. He knew what he had to do.

Raph leaned forward. Immediately, he felt the warm trickle of blood run down his neck as the blades bit into his flesh. He was sure that the collar of his dress shirt would soon match his bandana and tie. That didn’t matter, though. The only thing that mattered was getting to Leo.

Raph strained further. He ignored the pain, the increasing dampness of his shirt, Donnie and Mikey’s frantic cries for him to stop. He was getting closer. His fingertips ghosted over the etched names of *Rules* and *Consequences*. He kept going. His jaw touched cold steel. Fingers found the grips, closed around them, and pulled.

The moment he’d pried the swords apart enough to free himself, Raph was on his feet. He hurtled over the railing of the float and rolled as he hit the street below. He came out of the roll and set himself at a dead sprint to race toward the open manhole. He had to get to Leo. He couldn’t let this happen. He couldn’t let Leo go alone. He couldn’t be alone. He was almost there. Just a bit further. Almost there. They wouldn’t have to be alone because he was *almost there—*

Something hit Raph in the back, and the impact sent him stumbling. That wasn't a problem, though, because the stumbling was still taking him toward the manhole opening. He recovered his balance to keep running for a few more yards. Suddenly, one of his knees buckled. He tripped, and this time he could not recover before pitching forward to the ground. He caught himself hard on his hands and knees, confusion overtaking him.

Why had he fallen? Why did…why did everything feel so strange so suddenly? Why was he so…so uncomfortable? His shirt was wet and sticky. Well, of course it was. He'd cut his neck. It was…it was really *really* wet, though. He balanced on his knees and one hand, bringing the other to his damp chest. He held it out to see that it was red. Red…and yellow? What were these…these yellow things stuck to the ends of his fingers? Where did they come from? There were so many of them. He looked down to see a few more on the ground. The ground was red, too.

Wait. None of this mattered. He was supposed to be running. He was supposed to be running to get to Leo. It wasn't much further. He needed to get up. He pulled one leg forward to try and push himself up and nearly lost his balance. He went to take a steadying breath before giving it another try, but a sharpness in his chest left him gasping. He didn't have time for this. Leo was…he needed to get to Leo. It couldn't be like this. This wasn't how it was supposed to work. He needed to *get up*.

He summoned every last ounce of strength he had, and yet it was still not enough. This time he could not catch himself, and he collapsed onto the ground. He felt his eyes sting with the overwhelming shame of his failure until suddenly, all Raph could feel was *pain.*

Chapter End Notes

Find me on Twitter here or on Tumblr here!
(I'm more active on Twitter!)

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!

- Art by @KazooLoozer Twitter
- Art by @@liyadart Twitter
- Art by @Cheezthaboii Twitter

Chapter 18: The Parade - Part III

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING: Graphic gunshot wound, extreme medical trauma, graphic depiction of surgery, near-death experience, vomiting, panic attacks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph's cheek was wet. The gaping wound in his chest was still bleeding, the blood pooling around him where he lay on the street. Raph knew he was just yards away from the open manhole where Leo had disappeared. He wanted to raise his head to look for it, but even the tiniest of movements sent white hot bolts of pain through him. He gasped, inhaling some of the blood that had gathered around his face. Raph sputtered and coughed, sparking another wave of blinding pain. The terrible cycle continued for a few agonizing moments before his brain caught up enough to tilt his head to the side and away from the blood.

Raph had been *shot*. It was almost too much to process, but with each excruciating breath, the reality of it was impossible to ignore. They'd had more than a few close calls when tracking down the gangs that worked for Superfly, but none as close as when Raph had almost been shot in their first fight at the chop shop. If Donnie hadn't thrown a wrench at the thug with the shotgun, Raph would've had a hole in his shell much sooner than this.

Holy shit. There was a hole in his shell. There was a fucking *hole* in his *shell*. Raph's breathing kicked up a notch. This was bad. This was really, really fucking bad. Raph gagged with the realization that little yellow things still stuck to the tips of his fingers were bits of his own plastron. Even without being able to look at the entirety of the damage, Raph knew that this was *so much worse* than when Superfly had cracked their shells.

Over the sound of his own labored breath, Raph could hear the whir of a drone above him. *Shit shit shit!* It was still here! It had to have been what shot him, and it was *still here*. Was it going to shoot him again? It came to hover in front of his face, barely an inch above the ground. It was so close he could see the tiny lens of the drone's camera.

He tried to scramble away, but the pain was enough to make his strained breathing stop altogether. He choked on the metallic taste still on his tongue, his vision whiting out, the sound of the drone drowned out by the pounding of his own heart.

He couldn't move. *He couldn't move*. It was going to finish him off. He was going to die here. He'd failed to get to Leo, and now his brothers were going to watch him die. He was stuck. He couldn't move. He was *going to die—*

"Your leader gave you an order, and you disobeyed," The voice was back and thundering loudly above Raph. ***"You have dishonored your brother and his sacrifice."***

"Won't…let you…*kill* him!" Raph managed to get out against the blinding pain. He was met with another round of insane laughter.

"Your brother will die, insolent child," the voice sneered. ***"But take comfort in the knowledge that his death will be far more honorable than yours. Unexpected as it was, he has earned my respect. He is on his way to me now so I may personally provide him a warrior's death."***

"No!" Raph growled, louder and stronger this time. He had to get up. He *had to.* In one last herculean effort, Raph managed to get his left elbow underneath himself. He had raised himself off the ground a few inches before his arm gave out, sending him crashing back to the ground. The pain of the impact was so intense that it was all Raph could do to stay conscious. He sucked a desperate lungful of air and screamed into the pavement. It was impossible to tell which was worse; the pain of his wound, or the pain of his failure.

Raph panted, frozen in agony for what felt like an eternity until something touched his arm. He flinched hard, sucked in more of his own blood by mistake as he gasped. He choked again as he felt the grip on his arm tighten.

"Kid! Hey, kid!" someone was shouting. "It's gone, the drone's gone! Keep breathing, kid! We're gonna get you some help, just keep breathing!"

Raph was glad for the instruction. He didn't want to have to think right now. It was nice to be told what to do. He focused on breathing. He coughed a few more times, hacking up the blood he had inhaled, wheezing as he tried to find a rhythm. If he'd had the mental bandwidth to spare, he might've been embarrassed about the dribble of spit running down his chin.

Raph cried out as he was turned on his side, then again as he felt a heavy pressure on his broken scute. He tried to recoil, but something was holding him in place. Through his tears, he could see a man in front of him. Raph's eyes trailed downward to see that the man was pressing something against his chest, his other hand gripping the rim of Raph's carapace.

The man was staunching the bleeding. Right, that was what you were supposed to do. It hurt. *It hurt it hurt it hurt,* but it needed to be done. The man had no jacket on, only a shirt. It wasn't enough for how cold it was. His jacket must have been what he was holding to Raph's chest. Raph should be grateful. But it *hurt*.

"I'm sorry kid, I know it hurts, but we gotta keep pressure on this, okay?" the man said urgently.

"There's medics on the way," said a woman's voice. Where was she? He couldn't see her. Was she behind him? Was she behind him like the drone was? Fuck, *where was the drone?!*

"Dr-n," he gasped, slurring hard.

"It's gone honey, it's gone, I promise," the woman said. Raph wailed sharply as he felt her apply pressure to his carapace. *Fuck.* That was right. He hadn't seen anything, so he must have been hit from behind. He wanted to ask how bad it was. Could Dad and Donnie fix this? Dad had always done minor shell repairs after accidents as kids, and Donnie had quickly learned how to do more serious shell repair after Superfly cracked them. Maybe he could figure out how to replace all the pieces Raph was missing now.

Raph's head lolled downward. He looked at the wadded-up jacket the man was holding to his chest. It was soaked through. Raph's blood was beginning to roll down the man's arm. Raph needed him to remove the jacket so he could see the damage. He needed to be able to tell Donnie how bad it was. He needed Donnie to fix it so he could go after Leo.

"RAPH! *RAPH!* "

Mikey. Mikey was yelling for him. He sounded far, but Mikey could be plenty loud when he wanted to be.

"Somebody keep those kids away! They don't need to see this!" the woman behind Raph yelled.

"LET US THROUGH, LET US *THROUGH!* " Mikey was howling. Raph grit his teeth against the pain of turning his head to look for him, but a group of people had gathered around him. Some were even holding their arms out.

"We're coming, Raph!" Donnie's voice carried over the human barrier between them. Donnie seemed to be the first to remember that they were *fucking ninjas* , because Raph heard a few startled cries of *"hey stop!"* and *"he's gonna jump over!"* before suddenly Donnie was at his side.

"Oh my god," Donnie gasped. " *Raph.* Oh my god, *oh my god.* "

"R-Raph… *no no no no no!* " Mikey was here now, too, babbling somewhere to Raph's right.

Their jackets were torn. It must have been from Raph's sai. He wondered if they were still up on the float like Leo's swords. He would need his sai if they were going to go after Leo.

"D-nnn," Raph groaned, unable to properly say his brother's name. "On the…g-ground…"

"What's on the ground? Raph, what do you— *oh god*," Donnie's voice wavered as he seemed to realize what Raph was trying to tell him. There was a startled cry from Mikey as Raph watched his brothers look down at the shards of his plastron on the pavement.

“It’s—it’s okay. We can—we can fix this, o-okay? Just—just—”

Raph could not keep up as the world around him began moving faster. One moment his brothers had been at his side, and the next they had been replaced by strangers. Raph felt himself nodding stiffly at them as they explained that they were paramedics. They asked if he was ready. Ready for what? He didn’t know. He nodded anyway. As they lifted him onto the gurney, Raph was sure his jaw would fracture from how hard he was clenching his teeth not to scream. He didn’t want to scare his brothers. They were still there, right? Oh god, where were his brothers?

“M-Mike…Don…Donnie,” Raph cried, realizing he was somewhere different now. There was a ceiling and lights. People too close to him.

“Let us go with him!” Mikey yelled from somewhere.

“I’m sorry, but your shells are too bulky! We don’t have room!” the person beside Raph said. A door slammed. More movement. It hurt. Raph gasped and cried. Someone told him to hang in there. He did. He had to hang in there if he was going to get to Leo.

More movement. All he had strength for anymore was breathing. The movement underneath him stopped, but everything around him continued to change too quickly for him to fully process. The ceiling was different now. People were hovering over him and speaking. He couldn’t understand any of it until he heard a pair of voices that he would know anywhere.

“Raph,” Mikey was suddenly inches from Raph’s face. “We’re here Raph!”

“Firetruck gave us a ride. Dad’s still on his way,” Donnie said in a rush.

“Raphael,” a woman was saying. Raph could hardly see her face though the tears in his eyes. “We don’t think we can give you human blood. Your brothers are going to begin donating so we can give you a transfusion.”

Raph cried out as the green blurs above him vanished. He tried to sit up to find them but yelped at the sharp pain in his chest and shoulder.

“Easy! They’re still here, okay? We’ll keep them right here for you.”

It hurt, but Raph turned his head to make sure it was true. His two brothers were sitting in chairs just a couple yards away. Some nurses were tying bands around their arms. Mikey was shaking so hard the nurse had to hold his arm steady to slide the needle into place. Donnie was reaching over to hold Mikey’s other hand, eyes on his crying brother instead of watching his own needle being inserted.

“Raphael, I’m Dr. Barron,” another voice said. Raph startled. His eyes darted around, trying to find the person who had spoken. His eye took a moment to focus on the figure that appeared at his left.

“We’ve been administering an anesthetic, but we believe your mutation is either dulling its effects or nulling it altogether. You’ve already been given more than we believe is safe, but we need to begin surgery *immediately*. Do you understand?”

“…I’ll…be a-awake?”

“I’m so sorry Raphael, but yes.”

“Wha…what’re y’gonna do?”

“The bullet shattered a section of your shell, and we believe it carried shards of your shell into your body like shrapnel. These shards are causing additional damage and need to be removed.”

That must be the sharpness he felt inside him. He wanted them out. He wanted it to stop hurting.

“O-okay,” he whispered. Everyone was moving around him quickly again. Everything was happening so fast. He couldn’t tell who was who. He wanted to know what was happening. Where had that Dr… Dr. Bar…what was the doctor’s name? Where had he gone? Raph wanted to ask him what was happening. He opened his mouth to ask, but all that came out was a pathetic rasp. He didn’t want to keep crying, but felt another tear slip down the side of his face. He just wanted to know what was *happening*.

“It’s okay, son, it’s okay,” his dad was saying, and Raph felt a clawed hand grasp his own.

“Dad,” Raph rasped. He instinctively tried to turn his head, but the pain made it impossible. His dad seemed to understand and leaned in. Raph could just make out the gray fur through his own tears.

“I’m here Raph, I’m here,” Splinter cooed, his voice wavering. “You are going to be okay.”

“*Leo*,” Raph whined. “Where’s Le…Leo?”

“I don’t *know*,” Raph’s eyes widened as Splinter let out a broken sob.

“Gotta…find…Leo,” Raph panted. “Dad, you…g-gotta find him.”

“We will,” Splinter cried. “The humans are helping. We will find him.”

“Okay,” Raph whispered. That was good. Raph had failed, but Dad would find Leo. People were going to help him. That was good.

“But Raphael, this is very important, okay? Are you listening?”

“Yeah…’m listenin’ Dad.”

“You are a *fighter,*” his dad said fiercely, his grip on Raph’s hand tightening as he spoke. “You have *always* been a fighter. My…my *strongest* little fighter. We are not allowed to go in with you. Your brothers need you to fight right now. *I* need you to fight. Okay? You hear me? *You need to fight!*”

“O-okay,” Raph hiccuped.

“Promise me, Raphael. You will *not* give up!*”*

“I w-won’t.”

“Sir, we need to take him,” someone was saying. Raph’s gurney began to move.

“I love you so much,” Splinter said with a sob as Raph was rolled away. “Now ***fight!***”

Raph was whisked down a hallway and through a series of doors. Raph was trying hard to listen as someone narrated what was happening. All he had wanted was for someone to tell him what was going on, but now he was only able to retain a handful of words at a time. He heard the phrase “lateral position” as a series of stiff, rubbery cushions and strange devices were used to prop him on his side. Straps were being tightened, holding him in place. He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to keep his promise to his dad. How could he fight when he was held down like this?

The moment he felt something cold and metallic prodding deep inside the crater in his back, however, *fight* was all Raph could do.

He screamed. He thrashed on the table. The straps were cinched tighter. The pressure of them hurt, but it was nothing compared to the tools digging and cutting into the flesh beneath his shell. He fought so hard that one of the straps snapped. His now-free leg kicked out and sent someone toppling over. The digging and cutting stopped for a moment while more straps were brought in and buckled unbearably tight. He thrashed some more when the pain returned, but he had finally been completely immobilized.

He screamed and screamed and *screamed.* Someone held his hand. He squeezed so hard he felt one of their fingers snap in his grip. Nobody held his hand after that. He wanted it to stop. *It hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt it* ***hurt*** . He started begging. He didn’t care how pathetic it was. He just wanted it all to *stop* .

But it didn’t stop. Someone was apologizing. He didn’t care if they were sorry. He only wanted them to stop. It *hurt*. He begged until all he had the strength to do was babble and cry. A hand was rubbing his head. He leaned into it as much as the restraints would allow, desperate to feel anything other than pain. It was so deep now. How could there be anything left inside him? Surely they had carved out every last piece of him. He felt something large and sharp being tugged impossibly deep inside him, renewing his wails of agony.

His scream cut off abruptly as he began to gag, vomit just barely caught in time by someone shoving a receptacle under his face. Something was suddenly in his mouth, flushing and sucking out the rest of the bile. Somewhere in the back of his mind he understood they were trying to help, that they didn’t want him to choke on his own vomit. He should be grateful, but it was all just too much. He sputtered and hacked as the tool was removed, and Raph sobbed weakly into the cushion cradling his head.

This was never going to stop. He couldn't escape this. They were going to keep digging until there was nothing left. He choked again as the tugging continued. He couldn't pull away. He couldn't do anything. He was tired. He was so, so tired.

There was something dark nearby. Raph could feel the emptiness of it. It was something even more hollow than he was now. If there was nothing in there, that meant there was no pain there, either. There was room for him there in that void. If he went there, he was sure this would stop. He wouldn't have to feel any more of this in there. He leaned away from the hand on his head and toward it instead. He couldn't move any more than that, but that was okay. It was coming closer to him.

As the thing drew nearer, it dawned on Raph that if it was *truly* empty, that meant Leo was not in there. *Nobody* was in there. If Raph went in, he would never find Leo. He would leave Leo behind. He would leave Donnie and Mikey, too. His dad, his cousins, his friends. The pain would be gone, but so would everything else. He would be *alone*.

He didn't…he didn't want that. Why had he leaned toward it? Being alone would be worse than the pain. So much worse. He was sure of it.

This was what his dad wanted him to fight.

He had promised. He had promised his dad that he wouldn't give up. He had promised he would fight. Leo wouldn't have quit. Even after the humans thought they were monsters, Leo hadn't let his brothers quit. He had led them to keep fighting. Raph would keep fighting now, too. He couldn't leave Leo alone. He couldn't leave Mikey or Donnie, either. His brothers' blood was in his veins now. He could not leave them any more than they could leave him. He wouldn't leave them. He *wouldn't.*

He thought about the man from before. The one who had told him to keep breathing. *Just keep breathing.* It was a simple thing, really. It *should* be simple, at least. Now, though, it took everything Raph had just to do it. He needed to focus on breathing, and breathing alone. He could not let himself think about the pain. He needed to only think of breathing. It was the only way he would win this fight.

So Raph breathed. In and out, in and out, in and out. It was all there was. The looming hollowness receded. He kept breathing. If he let up, it might come back. He let nothing else in until something penetrated the thick haze of his mind.

"Shhh…shhh, I know. I am so sorry, son."

"…ad?" Raph wheezed out.

"Yes," Splinter said softly. "I'm here, Raphael."

Raph blinked a few times. He was confused why his vision was so blurry, until he felt his father swipe at his eyes with a tissue. Oh. He was crying. Right. He was crying because it hurt. He squeezed his eyes shut and grit his teeth, his nostrils flaring, and sucked in a few shallow breaths.

His throat was burning. It was hard to breathe. There was something pressing against his stomach. More tears had gathered in his eyes, but he was able to see that he was still propped up on his side. His heart leapt to his throat.

Oh god. Was it still happening? Something behind him was beeping rapidly. Were they still back there, too? The beeping sped up. He didn't want to feel it again. He didn't want to feel the hollowness waiting for him.

Whatever else his dad was saying, Raph couldn't hear it over his own gasping breaths. He was so scared. There were restraints holding him on his side, but they had more give than before. They seemed to be there only to keep him upright on his side rather than to hold him down. Maybe he could get free this time.

He started to struggle, but stilled when he felt his dad's hands on him. One cupped his cheek while the other rubbed gently over the top of his head. Raph shuddered with a hiccup. Raph remembered crawling into his dad's bed when he was little and too scared to sleep in his own bed. His dad had rubbed his head just like this to soothe and calm him. Apparently, it still worked.

"Shhh, Raphael, you are okay. It's over. You are okay. It's over. Shhh…it's over."

Raph panted as his dad continued gently stroking his head and wiping away his tears. He was so tired, and his dad's soft voice and even softer touch felt so nice. He felt like a little kid. He wanted to drift off like this. He wanted to sleep now that he knew the fight was over.

That…that wasn't right, though. There was still something he was…supposed to do. What was he supposed to do? What was it?

Raph flinched and gasped as it came to him.

“Raph, shhh,” Splinter hushed. “What’s wrong?”

“Le…Leo…”

“They are still looking,” his dad told him in a too-small voice.

That didn’t…that didn’t make sense. His dad had said he would look, too. Raph grunted in confusion.

“Why…”

“What do you mean?”

“Why n-not…you?”

“They are working very hard, and I need to be here with you, Raphael.”

“No,” He’d said it as forcefully as he could. Splinter’s hand stilled on his forehead. “Go. Look.”

“Raph—”

“No,” he said again, louder this time. He tried to raise his arm so he could push his father away, but hissed as white hot pain shot through his shoulder. He couldn’t stop himself from crying out as the fire inside him burned.

“Shhh, Raphael, you must stay *still*,” Splinter cooed with a thick but urgent voice.

Raph wasn't listening. His dad had to get out there and find Leo. The voice had said Leo was going to die. Raph struggled against the straps to try pushing his father away.

"Raph!" his father said in alarm. "You cannot move! You will hurt yourself!"

"Go…find… *Leo*," Raph hissed. He couldn't move his right arm. A quick glance downward revealed that it was being held in place with some sort of strange sling. A series of Velcro straps secured it to a foam block that was snug against his side.

His left arm was trapped between more cushions being used to bolster him up. Raph understood that this was probably so the limb wouldn't go numb from his full weight being on it, but he realized it gave him enough room to reposition his elbow. Raph tried to push off the bed with his arm between the cushions.

The immediate stabbing pain in his shoulder left his breath catching in his throat. Raph saw the panic on his father's face before his vision faded, and Raph was out.

Something was in Raph's hand. It was soft and warm. His fingers twitched against it. It twitched back.

"Raph?" A small voice. Mikey.

Raph opened his eyes. They felt crusty with dried tears. The room was dim, but he could see Mikey sitting in front of him. His eyes met Mikey's, which instantly welled with tears.

"H…hey," Raph croaked.

"Oh my god, *Raph*," Mikey whispered.

Mikey was shaking. Raph could feel Mikey's hand trembling in his grip.

“God…Raph, that was so *scary*,” Mikey whimpered. “I thought…I thought you were gonna *die.*”

Raph closed his eyes. He didn’t want to think about it. He didn’t want to think about the hollowness. He didn’t want to think about how for a moment, he wanted to step into it. He flinched at the memory, and a jolt of pain shot through his shoulder. He gasped weakly.

“Oh god, I’m—I’m sorry, Raph!” Mikey squeaked. “Did I hurt you?!”

“No,” Raph panted. “You…you’re okay. Just…hurts. Happy…to see…you.”

“I’m r-really happy to see you too,” Mikey smiled through his tears. He nodded to some space behind Raph that he couldn’t see. “Donnie would be too, but he’s asleep.”

“Can’t…turn…”

“Oh, yeah, duh,” Mikey said sheepishly. “They uh, got you pretty, um… *immobilized.*”

“Big…word…for you.”

“Hey!” Mikey scoffed with a small smile. Weak as it may have been, Raph was glad to see it. “They’re being um…really cool about explaining to us what’s going on. They said uh…wait, do you want me to go like, grab a doctor or nurse instead to explain?”

“No…” Raph mumbled. He didn’t want Mikey to leave. What if he passed out again while Mikey was gone?

“Okay,” Mikey said. “Well, it um…it busted your shell up pretty good. And after they got all the…the shards out, they had to uh, wire as much of it back together as they could…”

“There’s…” Mikey started but stopped. He looked down at Raph’s chest, then away quickly.

“S’wrong…Mike?”

“There’s…pieces missing,” Mikey whispered.

“Oh,” Raph mumbled.

Raph didn’t really want to think about it right now. Instead, he let his gaze wander beyond Mikey. The lights had been dimmed, but he could still make out the half of the room that was visible from his sideways position. He knew hospital rooms weren’t as fancy as they looked on TV or in movies, but he was surprised to see how nice it actually was. The finishes in the room made it seem like someone had gone to great lengths to make the room feel as welcoming and comfortable as possible. If not for the medical devices lining the walls and the linoleum flooring, Raph could have mistaken this for a hotel room.

There were some comfortable looking chairs along one wall, and from Raph’s vantage point, he could just barely see one armrest of a sofa. That must have been where Donnie was sleeping. There was even a TV on a swiveling mount angled so Raph could see it if it were turned on.

His survey of the room quickly finished, Raph’s attention was brought back to himself as his shoulder ached. There was IV in the back of his right hand held in place by tape. The tube ran up his arm and behind him to something Raph couldn’t see. He could feel other tubes in places he didn’t want to think about, and he was extremely glad for the blanket that had been pulled up to his waist. He was wearing a hospital gown and could feel that someone had put some very warm socks on his feet.

It was nice that they had tried to make him comfortable, but with every passing moment, Raph could feel the pain more clearly. He could also feel a massive wad of bandages on his chest under the gown and another on his back. Either the throbbing in his shoulder was growing stronger, or he was just becoming more aware of it the longer he was awake.

Raph’s breath was quickening. He squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t want to cry in front of Mikey. He wasn’t afraid of looking weak, but he didn’t want to scare Mikey any more than he already was. His brothers had been through enough.

…his *brothers*. Oh. Oh *fuck*.

"*Leo!*" Raph gasped, eyes blown wide, body lurching from the realization. The sudden movement sent a wave of agony through him. The throbbing that had been slowly mounting rapidly peaked, Raph's breath hitching as the pain became unbearable. His vision swam, Mikey's blurry form just inches from his face, before the nothingness took him once more.

The room was dark. Darker than what felt natural. Raph could tell even though his eyes were closed. He wondered how they'd managed to make it darker. He should open his eyes to try and find out. It took a moment for Raph to realize he *had* opened his eyes.

Had they moved him to a room without a window? Even if they had, wouldn't there be light from any of the machines?

Fuck. His shoulder was killing him. He hissed in pain, and Raph sensed something nearby stir.

There was something in the darkness with him.

It should scare him, but it didn't. Whatever it was, it wasn't a threat. Raph wasn't sure how he knew this. It didn't matter though. He was glad it was here. It felt…warm. Good. Safe.

It seemed like it was closer now. Raph wanted to reach out and touch it, but he couldn't. It simply hovered nearby. That was good enough for now.

Raph would have been glad to lay there in the dark and silence with the presence forever. This was better than where he'd been. It had hurt so much. It still hurt. Despite the comfort of the presence, Raph could feel his shoulder throbbing as he lay there.

Raph felt a spike of concern that was not his own. Oh. It must have been from the thing that's with him here. That was nice of it to be concerned for him. He wished he could tell it how much he appreciated it, but Raph didn't seem to be able to speak. That was alright, though. The thing wasn't speaking either.

The feeling of concern was joined by confusion. Raph was admittedly a little confused too, but the presence was too reassuring to let the strangeness of the situation really bother him. So much so that it

didn’t even bother Raph when the thing seemed to begin examining him. He wasn’t sure how the thing was doing it. Raph couldn’t see, but could it see him? Either way, Raph could feel it’s careful inspection of him as he laid there. The scrutiny felt oddly familiar.

The concern and confusion emanating from the presence increased with the throbbing in Raph’s shoulder. Raph could feel it getting closer to the wound. Raph’s first thought was to shy away from it, but he understood the thing would not hurt him any more than he already was.

As the presence finally found the source of Raph’s pain, he was hit with a new feeling. Raph gasped as it crashed down on him, immediately overwhelmed by the intensity of it.

Fear.

Something was pulling at the edge of Raph’s plastron. The pulling turned into poking and prodding. He felt a fingertip press into his middle left scute, the surface depressing slightly with the pressure. Raph cracked an eye open so see a human with a mop of blonde hair bent over in the chair where Mikey had last been. The poking continued.

“This is *nuts,* ” a voice said breathily. “Wow, I mean just *wow!* The elasticity—"

“H-hey, asshole,” Raph wheezed. “H-having *fun?* ”

“Oh-my-god-I-thought-you-were-unconscious!” the guy yelped in a rush, almost falling backwards when the chair wobbled as he recoiled away from Raph.

“Who th’fuck’re you?” Raph slurred.

“Woody,” the guy said in the most maddeningly unhelpful way. Raph’s face must have betrayed his frustration because the guy shook his head. “Wow, sorry, I’m just *very* starstruck right now. My name’s Woody Dirkins. I’m from the Bronx Zoo—”

“You…you’re a…fuckin’ *vet?*”

“Yeah, I’m a veterinarian. I’m also, uh, a terrapin expert—”

“Don’t n-need a…a fuckin’ *vet.*”

“Raph, hey, he’s cool,” Donnie said quickly from somewhere down by Raph’s feet.

“D’n?” Raph mumbled. He briefly considered tilting his chin down to look for his brother, but he *very* much didn’t want to pass out again. He swallowed hard before trying to speak again. “Wha…whass happenin’?”

“You…you were shot,” Donnie said as he came into Raph’s field of vision. He took the seat the vet had promptly vacated. “We’re um, at the hospital—”

“No,” Raph cut him off. “Know that. Mean wi…with Leo.”

“Please don’t freak and pass out on me too, okay?” Donnie said with a small voice. “But nothing’s happened, and we don’t really know anything…I can tell you what we *do* know, which isn’t like, a *whole* lot, but first Woody’s gotta, um…he needs to check on your shell, okay?”

“*Fine*...” Raph growled. He would put up with being looked at by a *veterinarian* if it meant getting to know more about what was happening with the search for Leo.

“I know it’s like, *really* weird, but they needed him for your shell,” Donnie said quickly. “The doctors did…um, did their best, but it’s not like they cover turtle shells in med school, so they brought him in to, uh…finish things up…”

“You were…there?” Raph asked Woody.

“Yeah, but I don’t think you would remember. They only brought me in at the end for the shell repair. You were pretty out of it by the time I got there,” the vet said. Raph didn’t want to look at this guy

knowing he'd seen Raph like that. "They told me anesthetic doesn't work on you guys. That had to be pretty rough, amigo. You're one tough little dude."

Was this guy for real? He sounded more like Mondo than any sort of professional. There was something oddly comforting in the casualness in an otherwise clinical setting, though. Raph begrudgingly realized he didn't mind it.

"It's fine," Raph finally mumbled.

"I'm gonna go grab the team so we can check things out," Woody said before turning and heading for the door.

"Donnie," Raph grunted.

"Yeah?" Donnie asked, quickly repositioning himself to be right in front of Raph.

"You…okay?"

Raph watched Donnie's face crumple. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead to put his face in his hands.

"S'wrong? You…hurt?"

"No, I'm okay. This…this is all just so *messed up* ," he said, his voice strained behind his hands.

"Gonna be…okay," Raph tried to reassure Donnie. "Tell me…what's go…going on…"

"Yeah…yeah, okay," Donnie said, dropping his hands and sniffing a little. Raph knew Donnie liked explaining things. Maybe this would make them *both* feel a little better.

“We really don’t know much yet, but you have *no idea* how hard everyone is looking right now. I swear like, half the freaking government is on this right now. Nobody, uh…nobody died, but everyone’s still saying this might be one of the most sophisticated terrorist attacks like *ever* , so finding this guy is everyone’s number one priority now.”

“Any…leads…on Leo?”

“If there are, they haven’t told us yet. But they keep saying no news is good news because if…”

Donnie stopped. Raph watched his eyes begin to gloss over. He pushed his glasses up again to swipe at them before stammering on.

“Because if…if he does… *kill* Leo, they think that…this asshole is gonna wanna make sure people *know* …And they think that he’s probably…gonna want to make it… *dramatic* . Because of how over-the-top the attack was. Like they think that’s part of his MO. But setting something like that up takes time, so…”

“So until…he’s ready…he’ll keep…Leo alive?” Raph huffed out.

“Yeah,” Donnie agreed in a hushed tone. They sat in awkward silence for a moment before Donnie was rubbing tears out of his eyes again.

“I’m worried…about Leo…too,” Raph panted. The longer he was awake, the more his shoulder throbbed.

“It’s not just Leo…” Donnie said, gesturing towards Raph’s shoulder. “That was…*God* Raph, that was so freaking messed up…I just…I still can’t believe any of this is *real.*”

“Sure… *feels*…real,” Raph puffed in a weak attempt at humor. It fell flat.

“Sorry,” Donnie apologized with a wince. “They’re trying to come up with something to give you. You’re just burning through all the normal stuff they give humans, and it doesn’t seem to do anything anyway. They think they’re onto something, though…”

“Where…where’s dad?”

“He’s with the feds, but uh, I can try to go get him if you want?”

“No,” Raph said quickly. That was good. It meant he was finally looking, too. The search for Leo was way more important than this.

Woody returned, a stream of other humans entering behind him. Doctors and nurses. Raph felt small and exposed as they began shuffling around him. Between a nurse and a doctor fiddling with some device above him, Raph watched Donnie duck out the door.

Raph was trying to listen as the doctors and nurses explained what had been done during the surgery and what was going to happen with his recovery going forward, but it was difficult when he so desperately wanted to forget what had happened in there.

They had removed the splintered pieces of his shell from his shoulder, but he’d need x-rays to check for any they might have missed. He’d also need MRIs to assess the tissue damage. Woody had already reset and wired all the pieces of his shell and plastron that he could, but the gaps would need to be filled with epoxy. After all of that, he would eventually need to begin physical therapy for his shoulder.

As one of the doctors speculated that Raph’s mutation may speed up the recovery, a couple of nurses began undoing the hospital gown. They needed to check on the wounds and change the bandages. Raph didn’t need to look down to know his plastron was absolutely fucked, but he couldn’t resist the urge. He was met with a bloody mass of bandages being pulled away, revealing the shattered remains of his upper righthand plastron scute. Beneath the web of hooks and wires holding it all together, he could see congealed blood filling the empty spaces. His breath caught.

“Shhh, honey, you don’t need to look, alright?” one of the nurses told him gently but urgently. Her hand was on his cheek. “Can you take a breath for me?”

Had…had he stopped breathing? Oh, fuck. He *wasn’t* breathing. How did—how did it work again? Fuck. *Fuck.* The hand remained on his cheek, but he felt another on his plastron over his diaphragm.

“I want you to make my hand move, okay? Take a big breath to move my hand.”

Okay. He had…he had a goal. He could do that. It was just a hand. He could move that. He'd moved…moved a whole fucking van. Flipped it up off its side and onto the wheels for his brothers. He could move some human woman's hand. He *could*.

He gasped, air catching in his throat again, not making it to his lungs, not enough to move the hand, not enough to move it, not enough, *not enough!*

Frustration and panic rose in equal measure as Raph tried again, his second attempt as fruitless as the first. Oh fuck. After all that, after *all that* , he was going to fucking *suffocate—*

"*Good*, good job," the nurse praised as Raph finally gulped enough air to make her hand rise. She asked him to do it again. Somehow, Raph managed it. The nurse coaxed breath after breath out of Raph until he was able to follow a rhythm on his own.

What…what the fuck was *that?* Raph's mind raced as he continued panting heavily. Why had he done…whatever *that* had been?

"S-sorry," he stammered after a few moments.

"It's alright," the nurse cooed.

Raph wanted to disappear. He was so confused about what had just happened, and he desperately wished there hadn't been a room full of people to witness it. The nurse who had helped him breathe was muttering reassurances to him, promising that it was alright, that it was '*nothing to be embarrassed about*', and that it was '*completely understandable'*…

But Raph *didn't* understand. He wasn't sure that he even wanted to. He just wanted this to be over. He decided to ignore it. If he moved on from it, maybe everyone else would, too.

"So…how's it…looking?" he asked the room at large. One of the doctors came around to where Raph could see him to answer.

“Your unique physiology makes it slightly more difficult for us to gauge how things are progressing. I hope you can bear with us while we try to navigate these uncharted waters, Raphael,” the doctor said gently.

“S’okay,” Raph grunted.

“You may be visibly very turtle-like, but on the inside, you appear to be incredibly similar to humans. Your muscle and bone structures are obviously enhanced from the compound that mutated you, which explains your incredible strength and endurance. But beneath those enhancements — at their *core* — they are more like those of a human than a terrapin. I’m afraid very little is known about TCRI and their mutation agent, but I would say that it’s safe to assume that human DNA was used in its development.”

Raph didn’t really feel much over the revelation. They were turtles who could walk and talk like humans, after all. When they had gotten old enough to start really wondering about the ooze their dad had always told them about, it hadn’t taken much for them to come up with the idea that the ooze was meant to make animals more human-like. Listening to that Cynthia woman’s insane rant when they were being milked had confirmed it. It only made sense that TCRI would have used human DNA in the ooze to accomplish this.

One of the nurses was dabbing something cold and moist onto the wound on Raph’s back, and the stinging distracted him from what the doctor was saying. He wondered what it might look like back there, especially if he could feel the medicated ointment so deeply. If the bullet had shattered it badly enough for pieces of it to wind up inside of him, it was probably pretty bad. He didn’t want to think about it. He didn’t want to go through whatever had happened before when he saw his plastron again. He needed to focus on something else.

Right. The doctor was still talking. He’d let himself get distracted. By the time Raph’s attention was back on the doctor instead of his own shell, the doctor sounded like he was wrapping up.

“…so hopefully once we get that dialed in, you’ll start feeling a bit better. How does that sound?”

“Yeah...s-sure,” Raph mumbled, not wanting to be caught not paying attention.

“Great,” the doctor said, sounding pleased. “Well, I believe you’ve already met Dr. Dirkins. Since your shell is somewhat beyond us, we’re incredibly lucky to have someone with his expertise here to assist.”

“No problemo,” Woody chirped in as he stepped forward and into Raph’s field of vision once more. “I mean obviously the circumstances aren’t awesome, but getting to work on the shell of one of *the* Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is basically the highlight of my entire career.”

“Glad… *someone’s*…having…fun here,” Raph huffed out, rolling his eyes. Woody looked a little put out, and Raph decided to cut him some slack. He still wasn’t sure why he liked this guy so much. “I’m just…messing…with you…turtle nerd.”

Woody smiled and snorted out a little laugh. He rolled a stool close to Raph’s bed and sat down. He pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and scooted himself closer.

“Well then strap in buddy, because I’m about to go *maximum* turtle nerd on you.”

“Already…strapped…in,” Raph said. He wiggled the fingers of his right arm secured in place with the sling, then pointed toward one of the straps holding him upright in the bed. Woody barked out a laugh.

“Man, and they say *Michelangelo’s* the funny one,” Woody said with a grin.

“I’m…fuckin’…hilarious,” Raph wheezed. Maybe he should care about cursing in front of a bunch of adults, but *holy shit* was his shoulder really starting to hurt, and Woody still needed to take a look at it. He screwed his eyes shut for a second and took a few quick breaths.

“I promise I’ll be fast, and I’ll try to keep the touching to an absolute minimum,” Woody told him. Raph opened his eyes to see Woody’s filled with genuine sympathy.

“Okay,” Raph rasped.

Raph grit his teeth and shut his eyes tightly as Woody got to work. Someone put a stress ball into each of his hands to squeeze. Better than breaking someone’s hand again like he did during the surgery.

No, don’t think about it.

He could feel how close Woody was and could hear him shifting on the stool as he moved from examining one area to another. Raph flinched hard when he felt Woody's fingers ghost gently over his scute. Raph heard the wheels of the stool rolling quickly against the floor as Woody reeled back.

"*Sorry*," Raph gasped sharply.

"It's alright," Woody said quickly. "That's my fault. I should've warned you. I've never had a patient who could understand me before, so I didn't think about telling you. I'll tell you before I'm about to touch, okay?"

"O-okay," Raph whispered, eyes still screwed shut.

True to his word, Woody gave Raph a warning before each touch. Raph could tell just how hard he was trying to be gentle, but it still stung every time. With Woody's heads up before each touch, though, Raph was able to keep himself from startling and flinching through the rest of the examination.

"Alright. All done. Good job, amigo," Woody said a little breathlessly. Raph opened his eyes to see an anxious but relieved looking Woody staring down at him.

Raph was suddenly struck by just how stressful this all must be for Woody. Raph was sure being a veterinarian was no walk in the park and that Woody had probably dealt with some very stressful situations. If the way he spoke was any indication, though, he was probably used to a *far* more casual work environment. Woody might have a doctorate and technically be "Dr. Dirkins", but he wasn't *this* kind of doctor. Maybe Raph wasn't human, but even Dr. Barron said he seemed more human than not on the inside. To be suddenly thrust into a situation where he was responsible for the care of someone who was human enough for a human hospital? Raph could see how that was probably a *little* more stressful than what Woody normally dealt with.

Raph dropped the stress ball in his left hand and closed it into a fist. He raised it as much as he could. Woody understood and huffed out a little chuckle as he bumped Raph's fist with his own.

"So uh, the good news first?" Woody asked.

“Sure,” Raph sighed. That meant there was bad news, too.

“Well, you guys have *crazy* flexible carapaces. Like, a normal turtle’s shell just does *not* have the ability to move like yours does. And man, your shells move like *whoa.* Your plastrons are especially flexible. I think that’s gonna be a huge advantage to getting this healed up, especially with how much is missing.”

Woody rolled back a foot or so, and rubbed at the back of his head as he went on.

“The bad news is that this means we’re not gonna be able to just ‘set it and forget it.’”

“What…does…that mean?” Raph wheezed out. The pain was becoming almost too much, but he didn’t want Woody to think he’d made it worse.

“Like, this isn’t gonna work like a broken arm where you just slap a cast on and *boom*; a few weeks later you take it off and it’s all good. Think of it more like braces, y’know? There’s gonna have to be some adjustments throughout the healing.”

Raph couldn’t help but groan. He knew enough about braces from Mikey to know that ‘adjustments’ weren’t going to be anything fun.

“But more good news,” Woody said with a cheery tone. “I think we’re good for right now! We’ll keep monitoring it, but I don’t think I need to tweak anything right now.”

“Yaaay,” Raph groaned sarcastically.

“I’ll let them get you all patched up again, okay? I’ll see you later, dude,” Woody said with a silly little salute as he rose from the stool.

Raph said nothing as Woody departed and the rest of the medical team took over again.The stress ball he had dropped to first bump Woody was returned to his hand before they began redressing his wounds. Raph was a panting and sweating mess by the time they were finished. He knew he hadn’t been awake for very long, and yet he felt a bone-deep exhaustion overtaking him.

“Tired,” Raph said quietly.

“That’s alright,” one of the nurses said placatingly.

“Wanna…lay down.”

“You are laying down, honey.”

Raph grunted angrily. She didn’t understand. He was too tired to explain.

“He sleeps on his back. I think that’s what he means,” Mikey said.

When had Mikey gotten here? Was Donnie back, too? Raph was too tired to open his eyes to find out.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but you’re going to have to stay on your side like this for a little longer, alright?”

Raph didn’t even bother grunting again. He was so, so tired. He didn’t even try to fight it as sleep took him.

Something was nudging him. Raph grunted in annoyance. Why did people keep waking him up? Didn’t anybody understand how tired he was? The nudging suddenly stopped, and Raph felt worry that wasn’t his.

Oh. He was in the place with the warm presence again. That was okay, then. He didn’t mind being woken up if it was by it. He liked being here with it.

Raph felt the presence’s happiness at Raph’s thoughts. He could tell it felt the same way. It wanted Raph here with it. More than that, it *needed* Raph here with it. They weren’t meant to be separated. They were a unit.

Clarity washed over Raph. Of course. It was obvious now. There could be no other possibility, no other explanation for this feeling. They were a unit because they were *brothers*.

Leo was here with him.

A cascade of Leo's emotions ran through Raph's mind. Happiness, relief, excitement, gratitude, regret, shame, fear, but most of all, *love* . Raph loved his brother, too. He was so happy to be here with him.

Leo was happy, too, but Raph could feel a sense of urgency beneath the happiness. Raph could feel that Leo wanted something. What that was exactly, Raph could not be sure. He didn't understand how Leo could want anything more than this. They were together here. That was good. That's how it was supposed to be. Raph was content here. Why wasn't Leo?

An answer never came. Instead, Raph tried to enjoy the presence of his brother while Leo continued to try to do…*something* . It was too dark in here to see what Leo was up to, but Raph could sense his brother's efforts and mounting frustration. Whatever he was trying to do, it wasn't working. Raph felt bad for him. He could tell how much Leo wanted it.

Suddenly, the frustration gave way to a crushing sense of futility. Leo couldn't do it. The hopelessness Raph felt emanating from Leo was almost too much to bear, and Raph recoiled. It was growing larger by the second. Soon, Raph could feel an almost endless expanse of it before him. It was so massive that its gravity was starting to pull him in.

Raph couldn't let himself get sucked into that vast, dark void. It scared him. He knew it was not like the void he had faced before, though. That had been hollow and empty. This void was not empty, because Leo was in there.

Leo was in there, and Raph needed to get him out.

Raph dug his heels in. He reached into the pit of Leo's despair with one hand, the other holding on tightly to something he could not name, but still knew was much, much stronger than this darkness. He would not get sucked in as long as he held onto this. He groped furiously in the abyss. His hand found something, closed around it, and *pulled*.

Raph still could not see Leo, but he could feel his brother as he was yanked free from the depths of hopelessness. He clutched Leo tightly to his chest. His brother was shaking. Just as Raph could not see, he still could not speak, either. He knew Leo could understand him, though, so Raph thought as fiercely as he could.

Leo would not have to do this alone. Raph would not leave him. Whatever it was that Leo wanted to do, Raph would help him do it, because they were in this together. They were in this together.

The sound was small and distant, as if coming from the other end of an impossibly long tunnel, but Raph could hear it. His brother's voice, echoing his own thoughts.

"...together."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that I am once again a huge liar and that April didn't make it into this chapter. I had to break this one up into two chapters again because it was getting to be too much. So we have ONE MORE flashback chapter until we return to the present day. Sorry that this took forever and that I am terrible at planning these things out.

Since the last chapter, I've gone back and added links in the end notes to fan art based on each chapter!

I'm mostly active on here on Twitter, where you can see updates on why I'm taking so dang long to put new chapters out. You can also listen to my Mutant Mayhem propaganda there, or bully me into writing faster lol

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!
(plus a couple recent pieces based on this fic as a whole)

- Animation by @CataCrunch YouTube
- Animation storyboard art by @EllieSkellyArts Twitter
- Art by @KazooLoozer Twitter
- Art by @qlooping Twitter
- Art by @artunderwraps Tumblr
- Art by @_chr1ss_13 Twitter

Chapter 19: The Parade - Part IV

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING: psychological distress from unintended negative reaction to medication

▶ **There's one more MAJOR trigger warning, but it's also a MAJOR spoiler.** If you're hardcore and not afraid of the darker content at the end of this chapter, then don't click the dropdown arrow. If you want to see the spoiler content warning, click the dropdown.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

title card by dysfunctional-doodle



Raph woke to find the lights in the room dimmed. His shoulder still ached terribly, but it was no longer throbbing so badly that it made breathing difficult. He let out a sigh. However small the drop in pain may have been, he knew not to take this for granted.

“Hey,” came a voice toward his feet. Raph looked down to see April in one of the nice chairs along the far wall.

“Hey,” he croaked back. “What time is it?”

“It’s like 7 am.”

“Why’re you here?”

“Oh, wow. So happy to see you, too,” April scoffed sarcastically as she stood. She walked over to sit in the chair closer to Raph’s bed so he could see her better. “Your dad and everyone else are sleeping. I told them I’d hang here last night so they could take a break.”

Had April really been here all night? Raph wanted to say that he didn’t need a babysitter, but it was good that someone was here. If he was alone, there’d be no one to ask about Leo.

“Have they found—”

“Leo? No, there’s nothing new,” April said, cutting Raph off.

“Are you fucking *kidding* me?” Raph hissed. If as many people as Donnie claimed were searching, how the fuck had they still not found him?

“Hey, I’m just the messenger,” April retorted defensively.

“I know…Sorry,” Raph said after a moment.

“They told me it would be the first thing you asked about if you woke up.”

“It’s the only thing that matters,” Raph said instantly.

“You matter too, dude,” April said. Raph ignored it. This was nothing. He was fine.

In fact, this was the best he had felt in…however long it had been since the parade. He cautiously tried stretching his legs a bit, then his left arm. It was nice to move, even if just a little. He got ahead of himself, though, and twinged his injured shoulder. He grit his teeth as he hissed.

"Whoa, you good?" April asked.

"Yeah," Raph grunted after a moment.

"They said the surgery was…not awesome. You wanna, uh…talk about it?" April asked with a delicate sort of tone Raph had never heard her use. His response was immediate.

"No."

"Okay, that's cool," April said quickly. "You uh, want me to let you try to go to back to sleep?"

"Don't think I can," Raph told her honestly. The pain may have lessened since the last time he was conscious, but it was still intense. The exhaustion of having his wounds cleaned and rebandaged had been enough to tip him over the edge into sleep earlier. He was far from well-rested and still tired, but he knew there'd be no getting back to sleep while his shoulder still burned like this. "We can talk, though…kinda need a distraction here."

"What do you wanna talk about?"

"Finding Leo," Raph said, his answer once again coming instantaneously.

"Good, because I do, too," April said decisively. "And literally *nobody* will listen to me about this."

"Huh? About what?"

"About how none of this makes any sense! Like…we're just supposed to believe that this guy went through aaaaall the effort of making a couple hundred totally untraceable drones so he can kill thousands of people all at once…and then he just *doesn't?* All because he found Leo 'interesting' or whatever? Nah, there's *no way*."

“April, of course it doesn’t make any sense. Did you miss the part where this asshole was *clearly fucking insane?* ”

“How does a crazy person pull off such an elaborate plan like that?”

“Crazy people can be smart.”

“That whole situation didn’t just take smarts,” April said definitively. “It took *money.* It took *resources.* This has to be an *organization*, not just some solo nutjob making homemade drones in his basement or something.”

“I mean…a solo nutjob made *us* in his basement,” Raph countered.

“Okay, Stockman might have tweaked the ooze that mutated you guys, but he didn’t make it from scratch. He stole the original ooze when he worked at TCRI, right?”

Raph could see a glint in April’s eye. He understood where she was heading with this. She and Leo had been working on their little '*investigative journalism'* project for months now, so *of course* she’d go straight there.

“You think TCRI took Leo.”

“Yeah, I *do*,” She said, as if daring Raph to argue. He didn’t. “They’ve got the motive. I mean, they literally already told you guys they want your blood for more mutant super soldiers. I think that *whole* scenario of threatening people at the parade was set up to pressure one of you into giving yourself up.”

“But that Cynthia lady was in charge of TCRI,” Raph pointed out. “So, then who’s the crazy asshole from the parade? It was all raspy and fucked up, but that was definitely a guy’s voice.”

“I don’t think TCRI is working alone anymore. I think they’ve brought someone else in to *help* them. I mean, they *clearly* sucked at the whole kidnapping-and-keeping-you-to-milk-you-to-death thing if all it took was me and your dad to rescue you. TCRI knew how to make the ooze and stuff, but maybe

science is *all* they're good at. I think they brought this other dude in for the high-tech threat and kidnapping stuff."

"Okay, but if it is TCRI plus this new guy and they want our blood, then why not take *all* of us?"

"Hear me out," April said, and Raph could tell this was the part where she must have lost everyone else. "Taking all of you to milk you for your blood is the obvious move…but is it the *smart* move?"

Raph cocked an eyebrow at her. He really didn't understand what she was getting at.

"Look, I've been like, reading up on all these famous kidnappings and hostage situations and stuff. One person getting taken is like, obviously bad," April explained, and suddenly she was on her feet. She gesticulated wildly as she paced around the room and kept going. "But a *group* of people getting taken is even worse. If it's just one person, it's a tragedy. If its multiple people, then it's an *outrage*. The more people that there are in danger, the angrier everyone is about it and the bigger deal it is. And the angrier people are, the harder and longer they pressure the cops or government to do something about it. I mean, just look at the Iran Hostage Crisis."

"April, you're my friend and I love you, but *what the actual fuck* are you talking about?" Raph said, finally managing to get a word in.

"It was like, a whole big thing. But the short version is that there were like 50 hostages or something when the American embassy in Iran got taken over back in the 70s or 80s or whatever, and it took the government over a *year* to get them all back. It lasted so long and was such a huge mess that the president basically lost reelection over it. Like, that's how big a deal it was."

"Cool, thanks for the history lesson, *professor*," Raph said with an eye roll. "What the *hell* does this gotta do with Leo?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, Raph, because you *know* we all care about Leo…but my point is that he's just *one* person. He's not 50 people, or even just 4. Remember how worked up everyone was about protecting you when some of those asshole senators wanted you guys for experimentation and crap?"

"Yeah, of course," Raph said. It was hard to forget the protests and the mayor of New York coming out as their strongest defender. He tried not to think about how their life might have turned out if

people hadn't rallied behind them to keep them out of some government lab.

"Well, don't get me wrong; everyone is angry and super upset, and there's tons of public pressure on the government to rescue Leo before it's too late. Not just New York, either. *Everyone's* calling Leo a hero and wants him found. It's seriously insane how many different law enforcement agencies are working this case."

April sighed before going on.

"But…it would've been an even *bigger* deal if all four of you had been taken. That's what I'm saying here; *one* of New York's heroes getting kidnapped is tragic, but *four* would've been straight up unacceptable. The public outcry would've been *insane*, dude. I think they only took *one* of you so it would be easier for people to accept the loss and move on."

"What the fuck do you mean *'accept the loss and move on'*?"

April stopped pacing, and her shoulders tensed as she turned to look at Raph.

"I don't wanna upset you, Raph, but I was looking at kidnapping statistics, and they're…really not good."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that like…the average window for recovering kidnapping victims before they're killed is… pretty small. Like, 72 hours small. After that, the odds of getting them back alive drop pretty dramatically."

"…How long has it been?"

"You've been in and out a lot. It's Saturday."

The parade had been on Thursday morning. Today was the third day. The window was closing.

“But…but Donnie said…” Raph started, throat feeling tight as he tried to argue. “He said that they think…that this guy wants to kill Leo and make it…dramatic. Because the shit he pulled at the parade was so flashy. Like that’s his…his *style*. Like he’s taking his time because he wants to pull something big off…So…so there’s *still time*.”

“No, you’re not listening, Raph,” April said impatiently. “I don’t think they’re gonna kill him *at all*. It just doesn’t make *sense* to kill him. I’m telling you, dude; they just want us to *think* he’s dead so they can just keep milking him over a longer period of time for his blood. TCRI wants to run out the clock so people assume he’s already dead. They *want* everyone to think it’s too late so they give up.”

“But…but everyone wants to catch them anyway, right? Because of how…how sophisticated the attack was.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” April agreed. “Everyone’s totally freaked over what happened. Because if they could do it once, they could do it again. They’re dangerous, and they’ve gotta be stopped.”

April shifted in her seat. She looked uncomfortable as she kept going.

“But they can’t keep up this level of response forever. They can only justify it for as long as there’s hope Leo’s alive. If everyone thinks Leo’s dead, then they can scale back to just focus on finding TCRI. It’ll turn into a counter terrorism operation instead of this massive city-wide search and rescue mission, and that’ll totally be to TCRI’s advantage.”

“Why? What’s it matter if…if everyone thinks Leo’s…” Raph stopped. He couldn’t say the word. He cleared this throat awkwardly before going on. “That doesn’t change the fact that the government’s still gonna be after TCRI. If they find TCRI, they find Leo.”

“Because, well…when police are looking for kidnapping victims, there’s always a point where it just…becomes *unrealistic* that they’re still alive, and the search turns from ‘search and rescue’ to ‘recovery.’”

“…recovery?”

“Like…finding the body.”

“But there won’t be one,” Raph said.

“Right, because they’re keeping Leo alive for his blood. So I think eventually they’ll just give up on the recovery, too, and focus all their efforts on weeding TCRI out. If they don’t have to focus on getting Leo back, they can put all their money and resources into finding TCRI.”

“Again, I don’t see the *difference*. Finding TCRI is still finding Leo”

“The difference is the timeline, dude,” April explained. “They can slow down and take their time trying to find TCRI. From what I’ve been reading, these sorts of investigations tracking down terrorists can take *years*. They gotta go slow so they don’t tip off the people they’re looking for. If half the cops in the city are running around banging doors down all over the place, it’s just gonna let TCRI know when they’re close to getting found. The authorities gotta be stealthier. Like, sneaky spy thriller movie style, you know? And that means going slower so they don’t blow the operation.”

“You really think they’re just gonna give up on finding Leo so they can be *slower* about finding TCRI?”

“I know you’ve never been into the whole silent-and-stealthy part of the whole ninja deal,” April said with a raised eyebrow, “but I’m telling you, Raph; this is just how these things work.”

Raph didn’t know what to say. Objectively, he understood that April probably knew more about all of this than he did. It sounded like she’d really done her research here. And she’d been right about all the gangs working for Superfly, after all.

“Let’s be real, Raph...” April sighed. “The NYPD, the FBI, the CIA, Homeland Security…It doesn’t matter what you call them, because they’re all just a different name for *cops* , and cops aren’t like Leo; they *don’t* care. Not about people. They only care about *winning*. Getting Leo back would be a win, but finding TCRI would be an even *bigger* win. Once the public thinks it’s too late for Leo, law enforcement’s gonna just focus on trying to get that bigger win.”

Raph hated every single thing April was saying. but he couldn’t help but see the point she was making. There were still things that just weren’t adding up, though.

“But why go through all that effort? Why make it this…this whole big thing and threaten all those people?” Raph argued. “I mean, people don’t know where we live in the sewers, but everyone knows where we go to school. They could’ve attacked us on the way to Eastman or something. That would’ve been so much easier.”

“Well, if this guy’s as big of a drama queen as everyone thinks he is, he probably decided that wasn’t dramatic enough.”

“I guess…But at the parade, he said…” Raph began slowly, having to suppress a shiver as he heard the voice in his head. “He called us *monsters*. He made it seem like he was pissed that everyone’s calling us heroes.”

“One of the big theories out there is that he’s some anti-mutant extremist or something,” April supplied. “I mean, he was trying *pretty* hard to make you guys look bad by editing my footage.”

“So why would he work with TCRI if they wanna make *more* mutants?” Raph argued.

“Yeah, not gonna lie, I’m still working on that one,” April admitted with a wince. “Like…my first thought was that he was trying to make you guys look bad enough that people would turn on you guys and not even care about finding Leo…But honestly, if that’s what he wanted, it totally backfired. Like I said, everyone’s calling Leo a hero. And everyone was so freaked out because we all thought you—”

April stopped abruptly and looked away from Raph.

“April?” When April said nothing, Raph tried again. “*What*, April?”

“…you really scared a lot of people, Raph. You scared *me,*” she said, and was hit with the terrible realization that her eyes were glossy. Oh *crap*. Raph had never seen April cry. He was *not* prepared for this. Lucky for Raph, April pulled herself together before any tears fell. Instead, when she finally looked back up at Raph, it was with deep confusion.

“Why did you *do* that, Raph? What were you *thinking?* ”

“I wasn’t.”

It was the truth. At least, as close to the truth as he could get. He couldn't explain what had happened to him when Leo disappeared into the sewers, because he still didn't understand it himself. He couldn't remember what he'd been thinking, so maybe he hadn't been thinking at all. It was like something inside him had just…taken over.

"I didn't think…I just did it."

Raph could tell April was disappointed with his answer. He didn't know what else to say. Before he could even try to think of something to add there was a gentle knock on the door. It opened slowly, light from the hallway pouring in as a nurse let herself in.

"Hi Raphael, my name's Kim. I know it's early, but it looks like you might be awake enough to eat something, hmm?"

"Yeah…I guess," Raph answered. He wasn't sure how long it had been since he'd eaten, and yet he didn't feel all that hungry. He knew it was probably a good idea to have something, though. He really didn't want to stop talking to April about Leo, even though things had just taken an uncomfortable turn. But the nurse was already asking April to go grab so-and-so from the hall, and she gave Raph a little wave before heading out.

"Alright, we'll have to get you sitting up for this. Todd and Bobby are going to come help you move while I try to get some pillows in the right places around your lower back—er, shell."

"Okay," Raph said, a little uncertain. As much as he was looking forward to no longer being stuck on his left side, he knew this wasn't going to be fun. Just stretching a little earlier had been painful enough.

Two male nurses came in, the aforementioned Todd and Bobby who were obviously here for some much-needed muscle to get Raph upright. The first one, Todd, explained how it would all work before they started. Raph appreciated having a game plan and knowing who was going to grab where and what he needed to do to make it all as smooth as possible.

Raph could tell they'd done things like this a million times, but there was still some hesitancy about his shell. Having grown up roughhousing with three other mutant turtles, Raph was able to convince them it was alright to grab along the rim of his shell for a better grip. Through the fabric of the

oversized hospital gown, the men grabbed hold along the rim of Raph's carapace, counted to three, and lifted.

Even with their carefully coordinated strategy, the process was awkward, difficult, and *absolutely fucking excruciating*. Raph clenched his jaw and growled through the pain as he was hauled into a sitting position. Todd and Bobby held him steady as Kim bolstered him in place with more rubbery cushions and pillows. It took a few moments repositioning things around the lower half of his shell and the left side of his back before she was satisfied that nothing was too close to the wound on his carapace.

By the end of it, eating was the last thing Raph wanted to do. He felt weak and lightheaded as the pain in his shoulder seemed to radiate down his spine and his right arm. Shit, his *arm* . He was right-handed. How was he even going to eat when his right arm was still immobilized by the sling and foam block? When he realized that Kim was also there to help with that, too, Raph was *very* glad April had left.

She was clearly good at her job, though, because she distracted Raph from the humiliation of being spoon fed by giving him more details about his recovery. Raph hung on her every word, grateful for something to think about other than how absolutely embarrassing this was.

They would be moving him upright like this whenever he wasn't sleeping so he didn't develop bedsores on his left side. If he was feeling up for it, they would come back later to help him get up and walk around a bit. At this news, Raph eyed the door to the en suite bathroom. He was more than a little eager to get on his feet so he could be done with the *other* most humiliating part of this whole experience.

If Raph had thought being fed was mortifying, it was nothing compared to the experience of having his catheter removed. As she worked, Raph had to mentally repeat to himself that Kim was a nurse and dealt with this sort of thing every single day, and that this was just a normal, unavoidable part of being hospitalized. The thought did little to ease the heat in his face, though.

Kim once again kept Raph distracted from what she was doing by continuing with his recovery plan. Raph still wouldn't be able to sleep on his back until Woody determined it was safe to remove the hardware from his shell, and Kim had no idea how long that might be. He would be back every day to monitor his shell whenever they changed the bandages and make adjustments when necessary.

"Do you know what happened to my phone? It would've been in my uh, my suit pocket…" Raph asked after the single most awkward moment of his life was finally over.

Kim was cleaning things up and getting ready to leave, and Raph wasn't sure if April was coming back or not. He was *way* too awake now to go back to sleep. He really wasn't looking forward to sitting here alone. If April wasn't coming back, at least Raph could try looking up if anything was in the news about the search for Leo. He was positive his phone had been in his pocket, but he had vague memories of his suit being cut off at some point before the surgery. Surely, they would've checked his pockets before throwing the ruined clothes away.

"I'm really sorry, but I think it was turned over to the authorities," Kim said sympathetically. "I'm not really in the loop and I don't know much, but I believe they're checking to see if it's been hacked or compromised in any way."

"Oh," Raph said numbly. He had to admit it made sense to check if it had been hacked after everything that had happened, but he hated the idea of someone else poking around in his phone.

"We've got the TV set up here for you, though," Kim said reassuringly, grabbing the TV remote and handing it to Raph. There were some buttons built into the side railing of his hospital bed, and Kim showed him which button to press if he needed to call a nurse for any reason before heading out.

Raph wasn't alone for long, however. As soon as Kim left, a middle-aged doctor was in Raph's doorway. He had deep lines in his face and what seemed like a permanently furrowed brow, but he smiled at Raph when he entered.

"Hi Raphael," he said, entering and taking a seat on the rolling stool next to Raph's bed. "You may not remember, but I'm Dr. Barron."

"Uh, kinda," Raph said awkwardly. Raph could just barely recall a doctor introducing himself, but his vision had been too blurry to really make out any of his facial features.

"I want to go over something with you. But first, I wanted to apologize for how things happened. I've encountered my fair share of difficult situations in my time as a trauma surgeon, but none quite as difficult as yours."

"Sorry," Raph said, feeling compelled to apologize, too. "I know the shell is…uh, not what you're used to."

“Your shell was tricky; I’ll give you that. But what I meant was that it was difficult having to make the decision to go in without you sedated. I’m deeply, deeply sorry that you had to go through that, Raphael.”

“It’s fine,” Raph said quickly. He didn’t want to think about it. He just wanted to move on. “You did what you had to do.”

“Regardless, I still very much regret that it had to happen. Which is why we’ve been working on a sedative we believe may be compatible with your mutation.”

“Wait, what?” Raph asked, confused.

“Sedation may be necessary if adjusting the wiring on your shell is too painful to endure. Depending on the findings of the scans we’ll be doing later, there’s a chance we’ll need to go back in to remove any fragments that were missed. Obviously, sedation will be for your own comfort, but it’s a precaution for Dr. Dirkins and the staff here, as well. Two of my assisting surgeons were injured during the procedure.”

“I’m really, *really* sorry—” Raph began earnestly, but Dr. Barron held up a hand and shook his head.

“It’s not at all your fault, Raphael, and nobody is blaming you,” Dr. Barron said soothingly. “They sustained only minor injuries, and both wanted me to reassure you that they aren’t at all upset. But the fact remains that your mutation has made you *incredibly* strong. Much more so than any human patient I’ve had. Your reactions were completely understandable given the circumstances, but your strength poses a larger threat to everyone’s safety than we are typically prepared for.”

“I…I understand. I don’t wanna hurt anyone by accident…” Raph mumbled, trailing off. Just the thought of them having to go back in was making his throat close up.

“We’ll have to be conservative with the amount, though. It’s obvious you require much more than a human, but the line between ‘enough’ and ‘too much’ is still unclear.”

“So…what does that mean?” Raph asked, fidgeting nervously with one of the remotes in his left hand.

“It means that I think we will be able to achieve a moderate level of sedation at most. You may still be ‘awake’ but the sedation should make you comfortable and calm enough to not be aware of what’s happening.”

Raph’s stomach felt like it had dropped to the floor. After what he’d experienced, having the option to be unaware should be a relief. He didn’t want to go through anything like before ever again. He also hated the thought of accidentally hurting someone again. He should be glad they were finding a way to prevent that.

And yet, what Dr. Barron had just described absolutely terrified him for reasons he couldn’t quite grasp. Raph swallowed hard against the tightness in his throat. Dr. Barron made a sympathetic little sigh, his voice soft as he continued.

“It’s alright to be nervous, Raphael. But we’re going to do all we can to make sure everything is as safe as possible. If you’re ready, we’ll give it a try tomorrow when Dr. Dirkins comes to adjust your shell.”

Raph gave a jerky little nod. Dr. Barron asked if he had any questions about the procedure, and Raph could only shake his head no. He didn’t want to think about it. It was over. It didn’t matter. It was fine.

Dr. Barron repeated Kim’s instructions on how to call for a nurse before heading for the door. They must have been waiting just outside, because the moment Dr. Barron left, Raph’s brothers were there.

“Whoa. I wasn’t expecting you to be sitting up,” Donnie said as he entered, looking just as surprised as he sounded. He also looked tired, but not nearly as tired as Mikey, who looked downright *beat*. He shuffled in after Donnie, and Raph thought the small smile Mikey was sporting looked a little forced.

“Does that mean you’re, um, feeling better?” Mikey asked nervously. Oh, right. The last time Raph had seen Mikey, he had passed out mid-conversation.

“Yeah, a bit. Doesn’t hurt as much to talk anymore,” Raph told them. “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s still with the feds and stuff. We saw him for a few minutes this morning, but he didn’t have any new information,” Donnie explained, sounding weary.

"*Fuck,* " Raph hissed.

"Yeah," Donnie sighed. "It's…been a long couple of days."

Raph had been surprised to learn that it had been three days already. With how little he had been conscious, it hadn't seemed like that much time had passed. The past few days must have felt like an eternity to Donnie and Mikey.

Donnie looked down at his phone, and it was then Raph realized it was one had never seen before. The case was blank, not a single sticker to be found. Raph gave it a questioning look.

"They took all of ours to check for malware or any signs of hacking. Some detective gave me this one for now," Donnie explained. "Dunno what agency, maybe FBI? He said it was secure. No apps or anything, it's just for emergencies. Dad has one, too. He promised to call if anything happens…"

"Okay," Raph said with a frustrated huff. He hated being sidelined like this, but with how much effort it took just to grab the bottle of water that Kim had left for him, Raph had to admit he wouldn't be any help in this condition. The room lapsed into awkward silence as Raph saw Donnie and Mikey tried not to watch him struggle to drink left handed.

Without their phones as distractions, Raph didn't know what to do. He was already feeling exhausted, but he didn't want to lay down again. Raph felt guilty that his brothers were here sitting with him when they were obviously exhausted, too, but he selfishly didn't want them to leave.

He reached for the TV remote. They all seemed too tired to keep the conversation going, so Raph flipped through the channels until he found the news. He saw some talking heads and an image of what was obviously the parade. Before Raph could even hear what they were saying, Mikey was wrenching the remote out of his hand, whipping around to point it at the TV and slamming his thumb down on the power button.

"What the *hell*, Mikey?"

Mikey looked pale as he stood there holding the remote close to his chest, as if he were afraid Raph might try to snatch it back from him. As if he *could.*

“I don’t wanna see it again,” Mikey finally mumbled.

“See what?”

Mikey said nothing. When it was clear he wasn’t going to answer, Donnie chimed in.

“They’ve been playing clips from the parade. And they haven’t shown like…*all* of it because it’s too graphic, but there’s, uh…” he stopped for a second, and Raph could see him wringing his hands inside his hoodie pocket. “There’s footage of um…everything. With Leo. And of you…getting shot. And loaded into the ambulance and stuff.”

“Are…are you fucking serious?” Raph gaped.

“Yeah…because, uh, that guy didn’t just hack the screens in the square. Somehow they hacked the parade broadcast, and the network couldn’t cut the live feed,” Donnie began, hunched over in his seat and still fumbling with his hands in his pocket as he spoke. “It’s honestly pretty impressive from a technological standpoint, if you think about it…Like, live broadcasts have a slight delay so the network can bleep someone if they say a bad word, or so they can cut away if there’s an emergency. But somehow that guy made it so the network couldn’t stop the broadcast. The production trailer where Sophie was, that’s where they were editing the show live and switching cameras or cutting to the hosts or whatever, and apparently they lost control of that, too. So when, y’know…when it happened, they weren’t able to switch cameras, and one was showing…us. Which, again, is just totally crazy to think about, because this isn’t the 80s where it was easier to hijack an analog signal like with the Max Headroom hack. All these systems are *digital* now. Not to mention all the screens in Times Square are owned by different companies, so they gotta be running off different operating systems with their content hosted on *completely* separate cloud services. To hack those while *also* hacking the network broadcasting the parade is just *absolutely insane*…”

Donnie had to know Raph had no idea what the fuck Max Headroom was, or that Raph didn’t give a shit about *operating systems* and *cloud services*. Raph knew Donnie was just nervously info dumping because he hated being the bearer of bad news. And this was some *bad fucking news*.

“So everyone saw.”

It wasn’t a question. The way Donnie and Mikey could barely meet Raph’s eyes told him it didn’t need to be. *Fuck.* Raph would…he would deal with that later. Right now, Leo was out there

somewhere. Getting him back was the priority. Raph could have his little pity party once Leo was home, safe and sound.

"April was here this morning," Raph said, switching topics. "Have you guys seen her since… y'know."

"Yeah," Donnie nodded. "She got here while you were, um, in surgery. Like, there's a bunch of security and stuff, and they wouldn't let her in to see you until today."

"Security?" Raph asked. "What for?"

"Uh, well, since you're here and they're still kind of worried about the possibility of another attack, they've got the hospital on lockdown. I mean, they don't *really* think anything else is gonna happen… Like, they're pretty sure he only, um, shot you to stop you from following Leo, so…it's not like they think he's gonna come, uh…*finish the job*. And they don't think they're after us, either, but they're still escorting us everywhere anyway…They're just like, being extra super careful, you know?"

"…yeah," Raph said. He hadn't considered that he might still be in danger, or Donnie and Mikey. But if April was right, then none of them really were. If it was TCRI that had taken Leo, then they'd already gotten what they wanted.

The room lapsed into awkward silence again. Raph realized that Mikey hadn't said anything since taking the remote from him. Raph looked at his brother, who was anxiously tracing some of the buttons with his thumb while looking at nothing in particular.

"You can pick, Mikey," Raph said, and Mikey gave a weak little nod before pointing the remote back at the TV. After flipping through a few channels, he settled on cartoons.

They watched in uncomfortable silence until Kim returned with Todd and Bobby. The latter helped Raph off the bed and to his feet. With no small amount of effort and pain, the three of them shuffled along slowly to the en suite bathroom. His legs felt weak and unsteady after days of no use, but despite the immense effort it took to walk the length of the room to the bathroom, Raph was glad to be up and moving. The whole ordeal was far less humiliating than this morning had been, but Raph couldn't wait until he was healed enough to do this without help.

Whether they had left of their own accord or if Kim had asked them to, Raph returned from the bathroom to see his brothers missing. Kim told Raph they'd gone to have lunch in the hospital cafeteria, and Raph's own tray of food was waiting for him. Getting back into bed was much more difficult than getting out had been. Just like breakfast, by the time he was situated upright to eat, Raph wasn't sure how he was going to make it through a meal. Vision still swimming, Raph looked wearily at the lunch Kim was insisting he eat.

"Dr. Dirkins will be here tomorrow morning," Kim explained. "Since we're going to be giving you a sedative, we're not going to be able to give you dinner or breakfast. We really need to make sure you have lunch now, because after this, we'll only be able to give you water. Alright?"

"Okay," Raph said. It's not like he had a choice in the matter. What if Dr. Barron was right and adjusting the wires was too painful? He'd flinched hard enough to startle Woody yesterday, and that was with Woody just barely touching anything. What if he accidentally lashed out like he had in surgery? Woody was out there and maybe a little too into the whole turtle thing, but he was a good guy. Raph didn't want to hurt him by accident.

After forcing down the meal, Raph's brothers returned when Kim left. Mikey put cartoons on again, and Raph looked to Donnie. Before he could even open his mouth to ask, Donnie was answering Raph's question.

"Nothing new," he said, plopping down in one of the chairs.

"This fucking *sucks,*" Raph growled. "Three days, and they've got jack shit to show for it!"

"They're trying, Raph," Donnie said weakly.

"Well they're obviously not trying hard *enough!* God, the more I think about it, the more April's starting to sound *right* ."

"Ugh," Donnie groaned. "I cannot *believe* she made you listen to her stupid conspiracy theory."

Raph's eyebrows shot up. He had definitely not been expecting that. With Donnie's analytical mind unable to accept some of her more far-fetched theories, he and April had butted heads from time to time over her wild ideas. Their disagreements had always been good natured, though. Raph had never heard Donnie use such a fed-up sort of tone when speaking about April before.

“I mean, it’s definitely got some holes, but I didn’t think it was *that* crazy.”

“Dude, her whole theory is propped up by *way* too many assumptions,” Donnie scoffed.

“Yeah, okay, but—”

“Can we *please* stop talking about it?” Mikey cut Raph off, sounding equal parts angry and frustrated. Raph was about to push back, but he stopped for a moment to take a good hard look at his brother.

Mikey was sitting with his feet up on the seat, his knees drawn up to his plastron. He had his arms wrapped around his legs, fingers fidgeting with his shoelaces as he stared intently at the TV. There were dark bags under his eyes, which were slightly puffy and red. Had he just been crying? Raph looked over to Donnie, drawing his eyebrows together in silent question. Donnie’s shoulder’s dropped a little, the annoyance on his face over April’s theories dissolving instantly.

“Yeah, sorry,” Donnie mumbled.

“Talking about it isn’t gonna change anything,” Mikey grumbled. “We just…we just gotta sit here and wait.”

“Okay,” Raph relented, and Mikey hugged his legs tighter.

The rest of the afternoon passed in the same awkward and tense silence as the morning had. As time wore on, Raph watched Mikey nod off once or twice before startling back awake. He and Donnie pretended not to notice. As afternoon became evening, Raph had to convince his brothers to go home and eat when Donnie’s stomach started growling so loudly it could be heard from across the room.

“*I’m* the one who can’t eat, numbskulls,” Raph rolled his eyes. “You’re not doing me any favors starving yourselves.”

“You can’t even have like, a snack?” Mikey asked.

“Humans have to fast before sedation, too,” Donnie explained, getting up from his chair. “And they don’t know how his body’s gonna react to it, so it’s even more important his stomach is empty tomorrow.”

“Hopefully it’ll be worth it,” Raph said, shrugging his good shoulder as much as he could. “But seriously. Don’t just go to the cafeteria and come back. Go home and sleep.”

“You sure?” Mikey asked uncertainly.

Raph *wasn’t* sure. They’d hardly spoken to each other all day, but the company of his brothers had been nice. If Mikey was gone, though, Raph could turn on the news. If he wasn’t getting any information from the authorities or their dad, maybe he’d learn something that way.

“Yeah. You guys look terrible, and that’s coming from the guy in a freaking hospital bed,” Raph tried to tease. Donnie’s lips twitched a little, but no such luck with Mikey.

“The hospital has the number for this,” Donnie said, holding up the phone the authorities gave him. “If you change your mind and want us to come spend the night, or if you need anything…”

“I’ll be fine,” Raph said, waving his good hand dismissively a little while trying not to jostle himself too much.

“Is it, um…Is it okay to…” Mikey started but trailed off. He looked nervous and embarrassed.

“What’s up, Mikey?” Raph asked. It was so weird to hear his loudest brother speaking so softly.

“I wanna give you a hug, but I don’t wanna hurt you,” Mikey finally admitted.

“You’re not gonna hurt me,” Raph teased. “And even if you do, I think it might be worth it.”

Raph held his left arm out, the gesture all the permission Mikey needed. He leaned over the bed and gingerly wrapped one arm behind Raph, making sure to go no further than the left side of Raph’s

carapace. Raph didn't think that he had ever seen Mikey be *this* careful in his entire life. He squeezed Mikey as tightly as he could without hurting himself.

"It's gonna be alright, Mike," Raph said softly. "Dad and everyone else, they're gonna find Leo."

"Yeah…" Mikey whispered back. "And…and you'll get better."

"'Course I will," Raph grinned into Mikey's ear. "I'm *awesome*."

Soft as it was, that finally got a chuckle out of his brother. Mikey pulled away with a little sniff, then backed up for Donnie to take his place.

"Thanks for telling me what's going on, dude," Raph mumbled as Donnie hugged him.

"Yeah, no problem," Donnie said with his own little squeeze before letting go. "We'll be back tomorrow."

"Good thing you guys don't have your phones," Raph told his brothers as they made their way to the door. "If these drugs are as good as they're hoping, I feel like tomorrow's gonna be a blackmail *goldmine*."

"What?" Donnie asked, confused.

"You know! Like, all those videos of people messed up after the dentist and or the hospital! Where they say a bunch of goofy shit because they're drugged up," Raph laughed.

"Oh my god," Mikey gasped. "I didn't even think of that!"

"Well *I* sure did, and holy shit am I glad there's not gonna be any evidence," Raph said smugly. Mikey's face was starting to light up, and Raph's smirk grew bigger. His plan was working.

“We should swing by April’s on the way home,” Mikey said, swatting at Donnie excitedly. “I bet she’ll let us borrow her camera!”

“No, wait! Forget I said anything!” Raph said, trying his hardest to seem genuinely panicky.

“Ha, *no way*, dude! We’ll see you tomorrow!” Mikey said deviously with a wave, all but running out the door.

Donnie was shaking his head, but had a giant grin plastered to his face. He chuckled a soft “*g’night* ” and flashed Raph a subtle thumbs up as he followed after Mikey. Raph just rolled his eyes with another smirk. If some embarrassing footage was the price of getting a smile out of Mikey right now, then so be it.

Raph basked in the satisfaction of having successfully lightened the mood for a few moments before reaching for the TV remote again. He didn’t doubt that Donnie had shared with him all that he knew, but there *had* to be more. Maybe the adults thought they were doing the brothers a favor by not telling them everything that was happening. Raph wasn’t going to just sit here in the dark any longer, though. He needed to know what was happening. He turned on the TV and searched until he found the news again.

Raph knew he had made a mistake the instant he was confronted with an image of himself face down on the street. There was a pixelated red blob beneath him, as if blurring it made it any less obvious that it was blood. Raph didn't need to see it, though. He could feel it on his chest. Taste it in his mouth. It was choking him. He couldn’t breathe. *He couldn’t breathe.*

His hand nearly crushed the plastic of the remote as he jabbed wildly at the channel up button. He mashed it again and again until he found the cartoon channel Mikey had put on all day. Raph tried to focus on the soft colors and gentle music intsead of the hammering of his own heart in his chest.

Why had he turned on the news? Why had he thought that was a good idea?

*“Why did you **do** that, Raph? What were you **thinking**?”*

“I wasn’t.”

He just couldn't stop fucking himself over, could he? He dropped the remote and held a shaking hand to his face. He had been so stupid. He was *still* being stupid. Why was he fucking *like this?*

Raph knew that 'not thinking' was what had landed him here, but to not think anymore was all he wanted right now. Once his hand stopped shaking and breath stopped being something he had to fight for, he reached for the call button on the hospital bed. When Kim arrived, he told her he wanted to lay down and try to go to sleep.

Finally on his side again, Raph tried to ignore both the pain and the shame long enough to go to sleep.

Raph was sitting in the dark. At least, he thought he was sitting. He couldn't see a thing. He could feel a dull ache in his shoulder. He reached up with one hand to rub at it, but it did nothing to ease the pain.

The throbbing in his shoulder wasn't the only thing he felt. Something was here with him. He could sense it beside him. He reached out to touch it. Raph didn't even startle when it touched him back. Its hand was on his arm. It had three fingers.

Right. It was Leo. Raph had been here before, hadn't he? How had he forgotten already?

Raph could hear something that sounded like someone shouting from very, very far away. He wasn't sure how he knew, but Raph was certain he and Leo were the only ones here. The shouting had to be Leo, then. Why did he sound so far away? He was sitting right there next to him, wasn't he? Raph strained to listen.

"…Ra…"

One syllable was all he was able to catch, but a flutter of excitement beside him told Raph that Leo knew that he had heard it. Leo's fingers gripped tighter on Raph's arm as he yelled again.

"Can…hear…?"

It was still small, still distant and nearly unintelligible, but Raph *had* heard it. He nodded, but realized Leo probably couldn't see either. He should try to answer Leo out loud.

When Raph tried to speak, however, nothing happened. His mouth remained firmly closed. What was wrong with him? Why wasn't this working? He brought the arm not gripped by Leo to his own face. There was nothing on it that might be keeping him from opening his mouth. He ran his fingers along the side of his jaw with an odd sensation of discovery. It was as if it had not existed until he had brought his hand up to touch it.

What other parts of him didn't yet exist? He knew he had arms and hands; Leo was holding one while Raph used the other. Was he supposed to just…put himself together piece by piece? The more he thought about it, the more overwhelmed he became. How was he even supposed to do that? Maybe Donnie would know, but Donnie wasn't here. Raph wouldn't be able to ask him anyway, because Raph was sure his mouth had vanished the second he had stopped touching it.

Suddenly, Raph felt a jab in his stomach. Before he had time to wonder if Leo had really just *hit* him, it happened again. This time the blow came to his left shoulder. Another made contact with his right thigh from what felt like Leo's foot. They didn't hurt. Each one felt like the sort of soft sparring hits he and his brothers used to prove they'd outmaneuvered each other.

Was Leo *messing* with him? The blows came again, all in the same place, all in the same order. It didn't hurt, but by the fourth round of hits, Raph was starting to get angry. What the hell was Leo doing? Was he rubbing it in that Raph had so little control over his own body here that he couldn't even defend himself?

Well, *fuck that.* Maybe he was blind here, but Raph was *still* awesome at fighting. Leo may have been more skilled with weapons, but he and Raph were more or less on equal footing when it came to hand-to-hand combat. Raph wasn't going to let Leo have the win here without a fight.

Raph understood Leo was following a pattern, letting Raph anticipate when and where he'd hit Raph. Once he had realized this, Raph's reflexes took over. At the last second before another came, Raph swatted away Leo's hand as it connected with his stomach. His next attempt at a block for the jab at his shoulder was even smoother. Before Leo's foot could even so much as brush against Raph's thigh, Raph reached down and grabbed Leo by the ankle as it swung toward him.

"Gotcha," Raph growled with a satisfied grin. It came out garbled and distant even to his own ears, but he *had* spoken. Raph let go of Leo's ankle, and Leo's hand returned to his arm.

“Yes!” Leo shouted back. It was clearer now, but still slightly faint. Leo kept talking, but it was too fast, and Raph couldn’t make a single word out.

“SLOWER!” he yelled back, and there was a moment of silence before Leo began again.

“Figured…it…out…from…YOU!” Leo shouted back slowly, one word at a time.

“FIGURED WHAT OUT?” Raph felt stupid yelling when Leo was close enough to hit him.

“How…to…be…physical…here! Can’t…talk…without…a…body!”

That made sense, Raph supposed. But how had Leo gotten that from Raph?

“FROM ME?”

“Last…time! You…grabbed…me!”

Raph had to think *very* hard to remember what Leo was talking about. Something had happened here before…something bad. Leo had been…falling? Sinking? Raph wasn’t sure. All he could remember was reaching, grabbing, and pulling. It had never occurred to him that he might not have a body here. He had acted purely on instinct. He hadn’t had time to consciously will his body into existence. He’d just done it.

“I didn’t think…I just did it.”

Oh, yeah…acting without thinking didn’t always work out so well. Raph pulled away from Leo, sure that if he knew what Raph had done, Raph would no longer be the only one who was ashamed of him.

Raph startled awake. The room was dim, but there was enough light from the hallway to illuminate two figures across the room. He must not have moved as he woke, because neither seemed to have

noticed that Raph was no longer sleeping.

One of them was his dad. It would be impossible to mistake the mutant rat for anyone else. Raph was glad to see him. He felt like maybe there was something he should tell him, but Raph couldn't think of what it was. He was too tired.

There was a human speaking with his dad. He was tall, and his tailored suit betrayed the athletic build beneath it. With such an obviously fit physique, Raph was surprised to see the full head of gray hair the man sported. He was angled away, however, so Raph could not see his face. His voice was smooth and level as he spoke to Splinter.

"—will be doing everything we can to assist in the search. It's the least I can do."

"It is not your fault these people stole from you."

"I must disagree," the man said. "Our security was lacking, and therefore I am responsible for what has happened to your sons with the use of our technology. Which is why I will continue to offer my services to both the authorities and to you. Please do not hesitate to reach out should you ever need anything from myself or my company."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Saki."

Raph was barely listening. He was so, so tired. It was probably okay to go back to sleep. Dad was here. Dad would find Leo. He'd found them as babies in the ooze. He'd found them at TCRI. Dad would find Leo, with or without this stranger.

Raph drifted away.

"…Raph? Raph!"

Ugh. Why was Leo yelling at him?

“What?” Raph grumbled back.

“Where…did…you…go?”

“Woke up for a minute,” Raph answered.

“What? Can’t…hear!”

“I WOKE UP FOR A MINUTE!” Raph shouted. Right. They could hardly hear each other here. That was why Leo was yelling. This was annoying.

“You’re… *asleep?*”

“I GUESS! I DON’T FREAKING KNOW, LEO!” Raph answered with a shrug he wasn’t sure Leo could see. He wasn’t angry. This was just exhausting. He was so fucking tired. And hungry. His shoulder hurt. This *sucked*.

“What’s…wrong…with…your…shoulder?” Leo asked.

Oh. Leo didn’t know. He’d already been underground, hadn’t he? As he was about to tell him, the memory of the voice from the parade came to Raph’s mind.

“Your leader gave you an order, and you disobeyed. You have dishonored your brother and his sacrifice.”

Raph should be glad that Leo didn’t know what happened. He’d probably yell at Raph if he knew. Leo didn’t need to know how badly Raph had screwed up. Besides, it wasn’t a big deal. He’d get better, just like Mikey said. He’d get better, Leo would come home, and everything would be *fine.*

“Nothing,” Raph finally said.

The moment the lie left his mouth, Leo was gone. Raph was alone, and this time, he knew that the fear swallowing him whole was his own.

Raph lurched awake and was immediately overwhelmed by pain. Only there to keep him upright, the pillows and straps holding him up had done nothing to stop him from jerking his upper body. Raph was left gasping for breath from the pain of suddenly moving his shoulder so sharply. *Fuck* . Something was *definitely* wrong. This was the worst it had hurt since right after the surgery. He screwed his eyes shut as he tried to catch his breath, his good arm fumbling for the button to call a nurse.

Kim was there almost instantly, and Raph heard a small "*tch"* of concern as she bent over him.

"Looks like something reopened," she said, soft but urgent.

Raph could feel the bandages on both sides of his shell becoming damp. Fuck, he'd *really* messed something up for his wounds to be bleeding this badly all of a sudden. Why had he startled awake like that? He couldn't remember what he'd been dreaming about, or if he had even been dreaming at all. Maybe he'd moved too much in his sleep and the pain itself had woken him.

A few more people filtered in, and Raph was surprised to see his dad among them. Raph had thought Donnie and Mikey looked tired, but his dad looked like death warmed over. His eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with dark, heavy bags that were even worse than Mikey's.

"I told you, you must stay *still,*" Splinter said as he crouched beside Raph's head.

"Didn't…mean to," Raph panted.

"Luckily, Dr. Dirkins was already on his way. He should be here any moment," Dr. Barron said. Raph hadn't noticed him come in, too focused on his dad. "Raphael, we're going to go ahead and administer the sedative so Dr. Dirkins can begin immediately."

*"You've already been given more than we believe is safe, but we need to begin surgery **immediately**. Do you understand?"*

"W-wait," Raph gasped. The memory of what Dr. Barron said just before his surgery had Raph's throat closing up. He didn't want to do this. He *couldn't* do this. He had been apprehensive about it yesterday, but now that the moment was here, Raph was sure he couldn't go through with it. What if…what if the hollowness came back for him? What if the drugs made it so he couldn't feel it coming? He needed to be ready for it. He needed to be able to *fight*.

"Shhh," Splinter shushed gently. "This will help."

"I'll hold still," Raph begged. "I *swear* I'll hold still, Dad."

As if the universe were hell bent on proving him wrong, Raph flinched hard as someone went to pull at the bandages on his back. He didn't want them back there. Not again. He tried to turn his head to see what they were doing, but the movement strained the muscles in his shoulder. A fresh spike of pain tore through him, and he couldn't stop the terrified, whimpering moan that was ripped from deep in his chest. He tried to focus on his dad through the tears blurring his vision.

"Please, *please*, Dad," Raph whispered. "I don't wanna do this!"

"Raphael," his dad said, voice strained and fearful. "You must calm down! You are hurting yourself!"

Raph knew his dad was right. He hadn't meant to jerk away from whoever was trying to remove his bandages. He just hadn't been ready for it. He was getting things mixed up. This wasn't like before. He was bleeding, but he wasn't *bleeding out* . They were just going to fix his shell. They weren't going in. This wouldn't be like before. It wasn't going to come for him…it *wasn't.* He could calm down if everything just *stopped* for a minute. If he could just have a second to breathe, just a few moments to clear his head and convince himself this *wasn't like before* …

"Wait, wait, listen," Raph pleaded, then tried to explain. "I just…I just n-need a minute. Just a minute… *please.*"

"I must be here in case the medicine does not work. The sooner this is over, the sooner I can get back to the search," Splinter explained quickly. Even through the tears, Raph could see how frantic his dad looked.

Raph's next protest died in his throat. Dad was right. It was now the fourth day since Leo had been taken. They were running out of time. His dad should be out there looking, not holding Raph's hand through this. Finding Leo was the priority. Dad didn't have time for this. *Leo* didn't have time for this.

Raph felt it the instant the sedative hit his bloodstream through the IV. He let out a startled, weak sob as it quickly began pulling him down. His limbs turned to lead. A heavy, inescapable pressure was pressing him into the mattress. He was going to sink straight through the bed beneath him. He was sure of it. His head filled with sand. The world fell away as he sank deeper, deeper, deeper…

He was somewhere dark. Despite the darkness, he felt an odd sense of certainty that this place was meant to be good. This was a place meant for him. It was part of him. He knew it had always been here, just waiting to be found.

He had been somewhere like this before. It was dark there, too. That one belonged to someone else. This one, though? This was all his.

It was his, but he could share it if he wanted. And he *did* want to share it. It was too lonely here without them. He just needed to call them. Then they would come. Then he wouldn't be alone here.

He called out. Not with his voice, but something deeper. It was innate. Instinctual. Just like this place, it was something that had always been there. Something he had always been able to do. He just hadn't

known it yet.

Nobody answered.

He called out once more. Again, there was no reply. None of them came. He was still alone.

Something was wrong. It wasn't supposed to be like this. They weren't supposed to be alone. This wasn't working right. He called again, and again, and *again.* There was never an answer. Why couldn't they hear him? How could they not hear him screaming for them?

He started to run. Where were they? Why couldn't he find them? *Where were they?* He kept screaming for them as he ran through the infinite darkness. They were supposed to come when he called, just as he would for them. So why weren't they? Why was he alone?

Maybe the something that was wrong was him. Maybe he wasn't calling them right. Or worse, maybe he was. Maybe they could hear him, but they did not want to come. Maybe they knew this place was not good like it was meant to be. They knew that it was wrong. It was broken.

He was broken.

He hated this place. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be alone. *He hated this place!* He hated himself for ruining it. They would've come if he hadn't ruined it. This was his fault. Why had he done it? This was his fault. He didn't think. This was his fault. He just did it. This was his fault. This was all his fault, his fault, *his fault!*

He deserved this.

“I think he just moved.”

“Are you sure?”

“He just twitched again. Look.”

Everything was so heavy.

“Raphael?”

The shapes in front of him made no sense.

“Good timing. I think I’m done here.”

What was happening?

“This has to set for about an hour, though.”

What? An hour for what?

“We’re just getting this cleaned up for you, Raphael.”

Cleaning what up?

“This’ll sting a bit.”

It didn’t sting. It *burned*. His breath hitched.

“I know, I know…Just a bit more, alright?”

No, it wasn’t alright. His chest burned. His back was on fire. He couldn’t move. Everything was so, so *heavy*.

People were still talking. He didn’t listen. He just laid there, smoldering.

Eventually, the white-hot embers against his shell burned out. A dull but still painful heat remained. The heaviness weighing him down was slowly beginning to lift. There were fewer voices now. The shapes were starting to come together. There were three of them.

“I didn’t think it would be like this.”

“I know…this is kinda freaking me out, honestly.”

“Wait, did he just move?”

“Dude, you’ve been saying that all day, and guess what? He’s *still* just laying there.”

“No, I *swear* he for real moved!”

“Oh crap, he might actually be right this time. I think he was just looking at us!”

“Raph? Hey, you with us, dude?”

Was he? He thought he was. He *hoped* he was. He wanted to tell them that. Everything was still too heavy, though. His eyes lost the shapes.

“Aaaaaand back to nothing.”

“Well… *that* was exciting.”

“I mean, at least something’s finally happening.”

“How long is it gonna take for him to be back to normal?”

“Dunno…I don’t think they meant for it to put him out that deep.”

Deep? He didn’t want to go deep. He didn’t want to go back down there. He *couldn’t* go back there. He wanted to stay *here*. Here, where there were voices. Where he wasn’t alone. He physically recoiled at the thought of going back.

“Whoa, whoa! Hey, Raph!”

“Oh my god!”

“Take it easy! *Oh man*, stay still, dude!”

You must stay still!

Right. *Right*. He had to stay still. They hadn’t believed that he would. That’s why they had done it. He had to show them he could. They didn’t need to send him back there. He could be still. He *could*. He

would prove it.

"Oh thank *god*."

"Good job, dude. Just…just be chill, okay?"

"So…" he whispered, trailing off. Talking was hard again.

"Oh man, I think he's talking."

"What'd you say, Raph?"

"I'm…so…"

"It's okay, take your time."

"I'm…so…fuckin'...*chill*."

There was a beat of silence, then a burst of laughter. Donnie, Mikey and April. Raph loved the sound of it. They were here. He felt like grinning, but the most he could manage was a twitch of his lips.

"How do you feel?" April asked.

"Like… *shit.*"

"Does your shell hurt?" Donnie this time. "Do you feel like you're gonna throw up?"

Raph just grunted in response. Of course his shell hurt. Of course he wanted to throw up. There was nothing in his stomach to throw up, though. He was nauseous and hungry at the same time. This

sucked. The room was spinning a little. He closed his eyes, but the dizziness remained.

"I'll go tell them he's awake. Well, *legit* awake, I mean," April said awkwardly. Raph heard the door open and close across the room.

He was glad Donnie and Mikey were still here.

"Get…anything…good?" Raph asked, eyes still screwed shut.

"What?" Mikey asked. Raph could hear that Mikey was sitting closest to him.

"On…camera…"

"You literally could not have been any less funny, dude."

"Sorry," Raph mumbled. He'd been looking forward to his brothers laughing, even if it was at his own expense.

"Hey, I'm just glad that it worked out. They got worried for a minute."

"…worried?"

"They said your heart rate spiked for a little bit," Donnie explained. "But you were like, totally out of it."

His heart rate? Why would that have happened? Raph couldn't remember. Besides, it didn't matter anymore. Sure, he was sore and hungry and more than a little nauseous, but his brothers were here. At least, most of them.

"…Leo?"

“Sorry, Raph…there’s nothing new.”

He wasn’t happy about it, but it was alright. Dad wasn’t here, which meant he was out looking. Dad would find Leo soon. Then everyone would be here.

April returned with Kim. There were some other people, too. They asked him questions he forgot as soon as he answered. They fiddled with the machines surrounding him. They didn’t sit him up, though, and Kim fed him on his side. It was difficult and awkward, but Raph was too hungry to care. He didn’t even care that his brothers and April were still there to see. He was happy they were there, even if this should be embarrassing. Even if this was all his fault. They were there, and as he slowly nodded off to sleep, he knew it was more than he deserved.

The next few days passed in an agonizingly boring routine. Raph would wake, be helped into sitting up, fed, and helped to the bathroom. Then he’d have his bandages changed and Woody would check his shell. After, he’d watch mindless tv with his brothers and sometimes April while waiting for a phone call that never came, then fed again and helped back onto his side to sleep. One evening as his brothers bid him goodnight and headed out for the Lair, Raph realized it had been more than a week since the parade.

Raph knew what he was about to do was stupid, but he was getting desperate. He held the TV remote in his hand, his thumb hovering over the power button. He really, really wasn’t sure he was ready to see any more clips of himself after the shooting, but they’d gotten absolutely *nothing* from their dad or the authorities.

It *had* been over a week now, though. Maybe it was played out already and they’d stopped showing the clips of him. Surely everyone had already seen by this point. But Leo and the attacker’s whereabouts were still a mystery waiting to be solved.

After a few moments of debate, he decided it was worth the risk. The TV flickered to life. Raph found the news, and he was glad nobody was around to see him hold his breath for a moment.

There was a birds-eye-view of the parade route displayed on the screen. Little animated parade floats had been superimposed over it. Some anchor was describing the positioning of the turtles’ float along the route as the attack had commenced. His bored tone suggested he’d repeated this more than once, and that it was old news. Fuck. Were people were really moving on already?

Before Raph even had time to get angry over the thought, the anchor was cut off mid-sentence. The screen went black. Raph thought for a moment they had cut to commercial by mistake, but as the seconds ticked by, nothing happened. Then, a terrible, familiar voice broke the silence.

"Good evening."

Raph stopped breathing. It was him.

"And it is indeed a good evening! For tonight, you shall bear witness to something truly spectacular."

The blackness was replaced by an image that made Raph's heart stop.

It was Leo.

He was sitting on the floor, his knees bent outward. He no longer wore the suit from the parade. Instead, he had only his mask. His eyes were cast downward, seemingly focused on the object on the floor at his knees. Raph was not even half the swordsman his brother was, but he recognized the short, traditional-looking blade immediately. It was a *tantō.*

"Yes, this is something so rare, so singularly extraordinary, that I wanted to share this moment with all of you."

A set of legs entered the frame. Clad in dark, split-toed socks, the legs came to stand directly behind Leo. A hand with a strange, spiked gauntlet reached down, grabbed the tails of Leo's mask, and forced his head up until he was staring directly into the camera.

Raph's paralyzing fear was immediately overtaken by confusion. The eyes staring at him through the screen were…*wrong* . At first glance, it seemed as if they were blown wide in terror. But Raph knew his brother's fear. He had watched it grow year after year. He had learned to live with it, and however begrudgingly, Raph had accepted it as a fundamental part of who Leo was. Raph had seen it in its purest form as Leo held his swords at Raph's throat. He *knew* Leo's fear. He knew what it looked like in Leo's eyes, and it was nowhere to be found in the figure on screen.

That thing on its knees was not Leo.

Just like his eyes, everything about this not-Leo was almost, *almost* right, but also so, *so* wrong. Its face was exact shape Raph had known all his life, but there was no kindness in it. Those arms looked just as they should, but Raph was certain they had never been slung over his own shoulders. Those arms had never elbowed him as they wrestled over the same controller, never reached out to hall him off the floor after he'd lost at sparring, never wrapped around him, never pulled him into a hug, never squeezed him against that chest.

So distracted by the thing on the screen trying so hard but failing so miserably at being his brother, Raph almost missed what the voice said next.

"Tonight, you shall see a true restoration of honor."

The hand released the not-Leo's mask tails, and its head dropped forward. Raph was glad he no longer had to look at its unsettling, empty eyes.

"I am a man of my word. I promised him a warrior's death to restore his honor."

Raph finally understood. He didn't have to be a martial arts nerd like Leo or a Japanese history geek like Donnie to know what was happening. The position on the floor. The short blade. '*Restoration of honor*.'

This was *seppukku.* Ritual suicide.

The not-Leo reached out for the *tantō.* Its hand wrapped around the hilt, brought it off the floor, then turned it inwards. It brought the tip to rest in the crevice between the scutes on his stomach. Its plastron would be easier to penetrate there. It let out a shaky breath and screwed its eyes shut. It adjusted its grip, both hands now at the ready.

As the blade plunged into the not-Leo's stomach, the door to Raph's room flew open. It slammed loudly against the wall as Kim flung herself across the room toward the TV. She fumbled wildly for a power button on the back that she could not find, quickly giving up in favor of ripping the power cord

form wall socket. She whipped around to look at Raph, shock written in every inch of her face. Her hands shook as they covered her mouth, her wide eyes full of tears.

"*R-Raphael* ," she gasped. "Oh my god, you saw—you— *oh my god,* I'm *so sorry—"*

"It's okay," he told her calmly. "That wasn't real."

Raph had expected to see relief in her eyes, maybe even a little embarrassment from having been so easily fooled. He was confused when instead, his words were only met with an unmistakable look of pity.

Chapter End Notes

AWESOME FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER!
- Art by @boxfullaturtles Tumblr

Fanart Megathread Link
(may contain spoilers)

Chapter 20: The Parade - Part V

Chapter Notes

Content warning:

Gaslighting/psychological torture, extreme mental anguish, medication without Raph's consent, unintended side effects of medication.

See the end of the chapter for more notes



Title card art by @milovebisco

“Oh…oh *Raphael,*” Kim whispered sadly.

“No, I’m serious, it’s okay,” Raph almost laughed. He felt bad that Kim had apparently believed that whole stunt. He wanted to put her at ease, so he tried explaining again. “That was—well, I dunno how they did it, but that was *faked.* That wasn’t real.”

Kim opened her mouth to say something, but she was cut off by an agent in tactical gear barging into the room.

“Hands up! *Hands up!*” he barked at her, his gun raised. Two more filtered in through the door behind him.

“I have security clearance! I’m his nurse!” Kim shouted frantically as she threw her hands in the air.

“Badge!” he demanded, and Kim angled herself slightly to show it clipped on her hip. Another agent came forward to check it, giving an affirmative to the first. He lowered his gun but moved forward to aggressively begin patting her down. The fear on her face was too much for Raph, who swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood.

“Don’t *grab* her, asshole!” Raph growled.

“Raphael, *please* get back on the bed,” Kim said urgently, her voice thick with panic. “Don’t try to walk! You could fall!”

Realizing this was the first time he’d gotten up without help, Raph knew that she was right. He could immediately feel just how unsteady he was on his feet. His injured shoulder throbbed with the sudden overexertion, and Raph felt lightheaded. He grabbed the side railing of the hospital bed with his good hand and glared at the agent.

“What the fuck is going on?” he growled at the agents.

“There’s been another hack. That broadcast was on everything. We’re locking down the hospital,” the leader said briskly. His expression then shifted into what Raph could only assume was meant to be sympathetic, but felt about as fake as that video had been. “I’m sorry about your brother, but don’t worry, kid; we’re not gonna let this guy get you, too.”

“Everyone’s freaking out over nothing! That shit wasn’t even real!”

“Raphael,” Kim said in a tone someone might use with a frightened child, “I know this is a shock—”

“The only thing that’s a shock is how anyone actually *bought* that,” Raph said incredulously. “I’m telling you, that thing wasn’t Leo!”

“Orange and Purple secured,” a voice crackled over the radio clipped to the lead agent’s vest.

“Bring them to Red’s room,” the leader responded into his mic. “Did they see it?”

“Negative. They were on the elevator. We intercepted them in the lobby. Arriving back at Red’s floor now.”

Just before the transmission ended, the radio on the other end picked up what sounded like elevator doors opening and Mikey asking *“see what?”*

“Please, let one of us tell them,” Kim interjected hastily. “We’re professionals, your men won’t know how to break the news gently enou—”

Kim’s plea was cut off by a horrible, guttural scream from down the hall.

“NO! *NO NO NO!”*

It was Mikey. Raph felt as if a bucket of ice water had been dumped over his head. He’d *never* heard Mikey sound like that, not even after Raph had been bleeding out in front of him. Raph could hardly

breathe when we heard Donnie's gut-wrenching yell join Mikey's. The sound of his brothers down the hall was the most terrible thing Raph had *ever* heard.

He couldn't stand it. Raph couldn't let them suffer like that over nothing. He had to tell them the truth. He had to save them from this unnecessary pain. He let go of the bed's railing to take an unsteady step towards the door.

"Raphael, what are you doing?!"

"I have to tell them it wasn't real," he told Kim breathlessly, focusing all of his efforts on getting one foot solidly in front of the other. "They didn't see, they don't know it *wasn't real,* they gotta know it wasn't—"

"Kid, stop!" the lead agent said, stepping into Raph's path and grabbing his good arm. Raph yanked it out of the man's grasp with a snarl. If this asshole thought he could get between him and his brothers, he had another thing coming to him.

"Raphael, please stop, you're going to hurt yourself," Kim said with a level but pressing voice. Raph felt a little sorry to ignore her, but he *had* to get to his brothers. Raph had failed Leo when he hadn't been able to get to him. He couldn't fail Donnie and Mikey like that, too.

He made it another few steps before an agent grabbed at him again, but this time Raph was ready. He threw an elbow at the agent's face, the force of it sending the man to the ground. The other two surged forward toward him.

"Stop!" Kim yelled, and Raph didn't know if she was talking to him or the agents. Raph didn't care either way. He wasn't going to stop. His dad was right. Raph was a fighter. His shoulder didn't matter. He had to *fight*. He had to get to his brothers. He had to tell them—

One of the men grabbed at Raph's shell in just the wrong place, and Raph stumbled as he felt the broken pieces of his shell shift. He howled in both rage and agony, all well-practiced technique abandoned as he swung wildly at the two men. He felt something crack beneath his knuckles as one of his hits connected, but his satisfaction was short-lived as he went toppling over his own unsteady feet.

Raph's vision whited out as his broken plastron met the floor. He choked and gasped for breath, nothing making it into his lungs past the unbearable pain. Kim's raised voice was somewhere above

him, but he could not make out what she was saying. All Raph could hear was the anguished wailing of his brothers in the hall. He had to get to them. He had to get up. He couldn't fuck this up again. He couldn't breathe but he had to *get up!*

Something was touching his arm. Paralyzed by pain and breathlessness, there was nothing Raph could do as he felt the heaviness begin to spread through his veins, pulling him down, through the floor, and into the nothingness.

Raph's stomach plummeted when he realized where he was.

No. No no no no no ***no!***

He was alone in the endless darkness again. He remembered it now that he was back here. How could he have forgotten *this?* This terrible place where he should not be alone, but was.

The panic came faster this time. He wanted to run to try and find them, but he already knew he never would. He wanted to scream for them, but he knew they would not hear. He was alone here because he *deserved* to be alone. This was his fault, he just knew it was. This place was broken because *he* was broken.

Raph sank to his knees. Maybe he deserved this, but he could not bear it. He had not been able to escape it the last time. There was nothing to fight. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop this.

Some deep, instinctual part of him understood there was only one thing he could do now. He could not flee and could not fight, but he was a turtle. He still had one last option.

Retreat.

Raph huddled in on himself. Like a turtle retreating into its shell, Raph withdrew into himself. This was all he could do now to survive, and survive was all he could do. He was a fighter, but there was no fighting this. He just needed to survive. To survive was to retreat, to ignore it, to reject it, to not think about it.

He wouldn't think about being alone. He wouldn't think about how it was his fault. He wouldn't think about how he deserved this. He wouldn't think about anything at all.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

And so, he didn't.

Raph woke slowly. The first thing he registered was the pain in his shell. What had happened? It hadn't hurt like this for…for a while now, right?

Alongside the pain was a bone-deep heaviness. He was too heavy to move, so he didn't even try. It was enough of a struggle to just open his eyes, and harder still to *keep* them open.

His vision was blurry. It took a few moments to understand that the muddled shapes in the darkness around him were the things that made up his hospital room. The IV stand with a line that ran to a port in the back of his hand. The rolling monitor, its display too fuzzy for Raph to read, but was casting an eerie green light across the room. The empty chair beside his bed where people sat while they talked to him.

There was a new shape. If he could have moved, Raph would have jumped as it solidified into the figure of a man looming over him. The man reached forward to grip Raph's chin, forcing his head to tilt from side to side to observe him. Raph could not make out the man's face through the haze of the sedative but could feel his gaze on him.

"My, my, my, Stockman…You *truly* outdid yourself. Another miscalculation on my part, however."

The man had muttered this more to himself than Raph. His voice was smooth and level. He let go of Raph's head, his inspection seemingly over.

“Your strength and stamina would have made *you* far more suitable. With how easily you saw through the Utrom exosuit replica of your brother I had constructed for the seppuku, your abilities do *indeed* show some promise…”

Raph’s mind swirled with confusion as the man trailed off in thought, but his body remained limp and unresponsive. What the hell was this guy talking about? His abilities? Suitable for what? Utrom…like Cynthia Utrom? And what the fuck was an *exosuit?*

“Unfortunately, time is of the essence. Your abilities are still in their infancy, and the eldest is already at a stage that would take you *years* to reach. I cannot allow you to progress any further now that your brother is in my possession.”

Possession? What did that mean? Did…did this person have Leo? Raph tried to speak, to ask, to *demand* answers, but the words were smothered by the lingering effects of the drugs.

“Loath as I am to close the door on this unexpected opportunity, I’m afraid that we must nip this in the bud,” the man said. He sat down in the chair beside Raph’s bed and leaned forward.

Something was…something was *happening*. The closer the man got, the harder Raph’s heart beat. The sedative made Raph’s body heavy and slow, but he could feel a strange energy vibrating beneath his skin. The sensation hovered somewhere between terrifying and exhilarating. Eerily familiar, yet entirely unnatural.

All too soon, the feeling morphed into something more. Something…dark. Something *dangerous*. Raph wanted to retreat, wanted to pull away, but the energy continued to force itself through him. *Into* him. Further than Raph wanted, further than Raph could stand, until it reached something impossibly deep inside him. He gasped, his body shuddering violently as the energy sank its claws in. It tore into something Raph had no name for, and he could barely hear the man speak over his own desperate attempts to breathe through his terror.

“Yes…it seems it won’t take much more to break you of this habit before it begins. You’re already halfway there, and you’ve given me *more* than enough to work with…So much guilt. So much fear. So much ***weakness.*** ”

The final word was punctuated by release. The terrible energy that had so completely consumed him abruptly vanished, and Raph was left heaving on the hospital bed. The gasping breaths wracked his

body and jostled the fragile pieces of his broken shell painfully. His eyes were blown wide, and yet he still could not make out the face of the man. He was perched beside him like a predator surveying its catch, deciding whether to toy with it a little longer or to finally strike the killing blow.

What the fuck was *happening?* Why was this person doing this to him? *What* was he doing? Raph didn't understand. He didn't know what it was that had been found, or why it had been so horrifyingly *wrong*. It wasn't supposed to feel like that. It wasn't supposed to *be* like that. It was *his*. It was his to share if he wanted to. It wasn't supposed to...to be…

Nobody was supposed to go there unless Raph *wanted* them to. And he hadn't. He hadn't wanted that. Oh god, what…what just *happened? What just happened?* Raph wanted to throw up. He wanted to curl up into a ball. He wanted to disappear, but the dregs of the sedative let him do nothing more than weakly cry and tremble.

"Spare me the histrionics," the man said coldly. "That was your *mindscape*."

The terse explanation meant nothing to Raph. He felt sick in a way he never had before. He felt worse than sick. He felt *violated*. His breath hitched as he quietly wept, his body too sluggish and exhausted to even cry and howl the way he wanted to over the inexplicable horror of what had just happened to him.

"Underdeveloped as your abilities are, your mindscape is still vulnerable to infiltration and manipulation," the man continued, ignoring Raph's feeble sobbing. "You have not yet gained the ability to protect it, nor the capacity to consciously retain your previous experiences within it. If allowed to progress naturally, you would gradually begin to recall your mindscape, even while outside of it. With time, perhaps you could even master it."

The man sighed, and his voice grew softer.

"I am a wealthy man. Not even when I was your age—when dreams are lofty and come so freely—did I fathom I would ever have such a fortune. Even still…time is a luxury I can no longer afford."

What the fuck did that mean? Raph didn't give a shit about this guy's fortune or whatever the fuck it is he wanted. All Raph wanted was to get away from him, to yell for someone to help. But the straps and sedatives kept him silent and immobile, and he was forced to listen as the man continued.

“The medication they have been administering is of my own making, though your medical team is not aware of this,” the man said, leaning back in the chair and speaking as if he were discussing the weather. “While it *does* sedate you and offer some level of pain relief, this is not out of compassion. As you have so accurately come to understand, your pain is a fitting punishment. After all, your injuries are a direct result of your *disobedience*.”

Raph’s heart leapt to his throat, the words from the parade echoing in his mind. *“Your leader gave you an order, and you disobeyed.”*

“I simply needed your medication to appear to function as intended to avoid scrutiny from your medical team. So, the sedative may indeed ease the discomfort of your wounds…” the man nodded in the darkness. “But I believe you have already found that there are things far worse than *physical* pain.”

From the inside pocket of his sports coat, the man withdrew a glass vial. He held it up so it could be seen in the soft glow of the nearby monitor.

“Your ‘medication’ induces an involuntary manifestation of your mindscape, while simultaneously inhibiting the full range of your abilities.”

Why couldn’t this asshole just speak in *plain fucking English?* What the hell did any of that even mean? As if the man could hear Raph’s thoughts, he explained.

“In other words, this compound forces you into your mindscape, but blocks your ability to reach out to others, or others from reaching you. The effects may be temporary, but there is no greater suffering for those with this gift than being *stripped* of it. Just two doses have been administered thus far, and you have only spent mere hours trapped in your own mindscape. Yet, the cracks in your mind have *already* begun to form. ”

Raph didn’t understand. Raph was fine. Nothing was wrong with his mind. He was *fine*.

“After your foolish display at the parade, I admit I am surprised by your capacity for self-preservation. The isolation in your mindscape has been so unbearable that, incredibly, you have begun willing yourself to forget the experience.”

What the fuck was this guy talking about? Raph hadn’t forgotten anything.

“With how quickly you turned to *repression* to preserve some modicum of your sanity, it should not take much more for you to reject your mindscape and abilities entirely.”

The man leaned in closer, and Raph had just enough strength to flinch away.

“I know you’re afraid to be alone again. But you don’t have to worry, because this time...”

Raph could do nothing but watch while the man inserted a syringe into the port of his IV. As the new dose began pulling him down, Raph heard that same cruel, unnatural voice from the parade.

“I’ll go with you.”

Raph’s terror was as overwhelming as the darkness he found himself in once more. He couldn’t do this again. He *couldn’t.* He couldn’t be alone. He wasn’t supposed to be alone!

Except…he *wasn’t.*

Something was here. Some *one* was here. His heart leapt. He could feel them. They were somewhere in the darkness, but they weren’t far. His feet carried him toward the presence, the instinctual need to be near them helping him find his way. He couldn’t help but grin while he ran. *Someone was here!*

His smile grew wider as the figure first came into sight. Green skin, a shell…one of his brothers! They’d finally come! Raph had never been happier to have been wrong. They *hadn’t* left him alone here. He hadn’t ruined this place. He wasn’t broken, because they were here!

Raph started to slow the closer he got. He didn’t want to barrel into whichever brother it was and knock them over. He was the largest of them, after all. It wouldn’t be hard to do.

As he grew nearer, though, his brother didn't really seem to be any smaller than Raph was. He kind of looked like he was the same size as Raph himself. Actually…the *exact* same size. His joy turned to confusion as he realized why. It wasn't one of his brothers.

It was *him*.

Raph came to a stop, face to face with himself. What…what was happening?

"Did you *really* think they'd come?" the other Raph sneered.

The words stung through Raph's confusion. *What was happening?* Why were there two of him here?

"Y'know, Donnie's right," the other Raph scoffed. "You *are* an idiot."

What was he talking about? Donnie wasn't even here. Oh god. That was right. Donnie wasn't here. *None* of his brothers were.

"Of course they aren't. Why would they be?" the other Raph said, rolling his eyes.

Suddenly, the darkness around Raph and his other self was gone. Raph could feel that they were still in the dark, broken place, but somehow new scenery had materialized around them. He recognized this place. It was somewhere Raph had been before, months ago.

It was a chop shop. The one where they'd gone to get April's scooter back. The goons who stole it were standing on the other side of the room, looking in surprise and confusion at the pile of turtles on the floor. A third Raph was flat on his shell with his brothers heaped around him in a tangle of limbs.

The scene had a strange haze, and Raph knew somehow that this wasn't real. It was just a memory. His brothers weren't really here. He didn't let himself feel relieved by the sight of them. More than anything, it hurt to see these memory versions of them here.

“Raph, you idiot,” memory Donnie groaned on the floor behind memory Raph.

“You just ran in here without even listening to Leo’s plan,” the other Raph said, gesturing to the pile of turtles on the floor. “You almost lost this fight before it even started. All because you didn’t *think.”*

His brothers and the chop shop vanished and were immediately replaced by a new scene. Raph once again saw a third version of himself, this time in a hospital bed. April was sitting in the chair beside his bed, looking uncharacteristically upset.

*“Why did you **do** that, Raph? What were you **thinking**?”* memory April asked in a strained voice.

“I wasn’t.”

“See? You said it yourself,” the other Raph said with another sneer.

April and the hospital room fell away almost as quickly as they had appeared. Another memory took shape around them. Raph and his counterpart found themselves at the parade. They were up on the float still. Donnie and Mikey were on the floor of the float’s platform, pinned in place by Raph’s sais through the fabric of their shirts. The memory version of Raph was trapped by Leo’s swords against his neck.

“You can’t follow me,” memory Leo said quickly. *“What—whatever happens, you can’t follow me. He’ll shoot someone if you do. You just…you gotta just wait til the drones are gone to move, okay?”*

The memory sped forward, but Raph was no longer watching it from the outside. This time, he was *in* it.

Raph was on the ground, blood pooling around him where he lay. He gasped, inhaling a mouthful of it. The taste of iron flooded his senses along with his own terror. He raised his head to see the other Raph looming over him.

“Leo *literally* told you what would happen, and you still didn’t listen. You didn’t think about what could happen to you. To your brothers. To all these people,” the other Raph said, tossing a hand

toward the terrified crowd on either side of them. “Leo saved them, and you could’ve gotten them all killed.”

“I-I didn’t mean—” Raph stammered. “I was just—just trying to save him!”

“How?" the other Raph asked, sarcastic and indignant. “Seriously, how did you think that was gonna work? Oh wait, that’s right; *you didn’t.”*

Time moved swiftly again, and now Raph was on a gurney. His brothers were sitting with IVs in their arms, blood quickly filling bags for Raph’s transfusion.

“Look how fucking scared Mikey is,” the other Raph growled, reaching a hand down and forcing Raph’s head to the side to look toward his brothers. Raph could see Mikey’s fear through the tears in his eyes. He wanted to look away, but couldn’t.

“That’s *your* fault,” the other Raph snarled in his ear.

Raph didn’t have time to respond, because suddenly he was somewhere else. The last place he ever wanted to be. The last place he ever wanted to even think about.

He was on the operating table.

He couldn’t stop the guttural wail of terror as he trashed against the straps holding him on his side. This couldn’t be happening. *Not again.* He couldn’t do this again. He couldn’t *do this!*

Raph couldn’t see his counterpart. Though the memory of the pain paled in comparison to how it had actually felt in the moment, it was enough to leave Raph gasping. His attempts to catch his breath were momentarily halted as a dark mass began to form along the blurry edges of the room.

The hollow nothingness was back. Raph was too terrified to even breathe.

“You know what that was, right? I mean, even *you* aren’t that stupid,” the other Raph chuckled darkly.

Raph did know. It was too terrible to say out loud. It didn't matter, though. The other Raph spoke for him.

"That was death," he whispered viciously in Raph's ear. "You're acting all upset that your brothers left you here, but *you* almost *left* them."

"N-no," Raph stammered. "I…I didn't mean…"

"You *did* . You fucking *leaned* toward it."

"I-I was…it just…" Raph floundered. "It…hurt so much, and—"

"Boo-fucking-hoo," the other Raph mocked. "You're supposed to be the tough one, and you couldn't handle a little pain? What a fucking *joke."*

"I didn't mean to! I swear I didn't mean to! I wasn't—"

Thinking.

Raph hadn't been thinking.

The shame was even more unbearable than the memory of the pain. Maybe that was why the operating room faded away, leaving Raph on his knees in the darkness. The other Raph sauntered over to loom above him with a look of disgust.

"I'm not saying anything you didn't already know," the other Raph shrugged with a derisive snort. "You don't listen. You don't think. Why?"

Because…because he was broken.

“That’s right,” the other Raph laughed cruelly. “You’ve always been like this. The fucking problem child.”

Raph was plunged into a new series of memories, one coming after another without pause. Raph watched, frozen in despair, at what had to be his greatest hits of disappointing his family played out before him. The first few were from so early in his life that Raph could hardly remember some of these events. Dropping one of Mikey’s action figures down a sewer pipe, breaking Donnie’s GameBoy, throwing his training weapons aside to simply tackle a much smaller Leo instead…and his dad yelling, yelling, yelling.

The memories continued, and nearly every single one was punctuated by Splinter scolding him. He watched himself and his brothers grow older in the memories, and his dad’s brown fur quickly grow lighter. God, he had looked so young when they were little. How had he gotten so old so fast?

As a memory played out with Splinter red in the face yelling at Raph for nearly getting himself and his brothers spotted by humans, Raph could see the that last of Splinter’s once thick head of fur now was down to nothing but two bushy gray eyebrows. His stomach sank impossibly further.

Dad had always needed to worry about raising them and keeping them all safe…and Raph had always made that harder. He had made his dad’s already stressful life needlessly so much more stressful.

It was his fault. *He* had carved those lines into his father’s face. *He* had turned his dad’s fur gray. He was slowly but surely killing his dad.

“Stop,” Raph begged. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please, *please* just stop!”

“Why should I? You fucking *deserve* this. You already figured that out the first time you ever came here.”

The other Raph was right. He had known. But it was so fucking *painful* to know. He wished he *didn’t* know. He didn’t want to see any more of this. He didn’t want to think about it.

“Then don’t.”

Raph raised his head to look up at the other Raph, who stood there with his arms crossed and one eyebrow raised.

"…what?"

"Just don't think about it," the other Raph shrugged, as if it were obvious. "It doesn't have to be like this. You don't have to think about all this. I mean, you're already so good at not thinking."

Was he serious? Could Raph really just…decide not to think about this?

"You already have," the other Raph said as another memory materialized around them. Memory Raph was gasping on his hospital bed, panic-stricken as he struggled to breathe.

"I want you to make my hand move, okay? Take a big breath to move my hand," the memory nurse told him. Raph watched as the memory of himself fought to do as he was instructed. She praised him when he finally gulped in a few lungfuls of air.

Not until the memory played out did Raph remember the shame and embarrassment he felt in that moment of having panicked at the sight of his own injury, or how much he wished he could simply pretend it hadn't happened. How he hoped that if he ignored it that everyone else would, too.

"See? You had the right idea there," the other Raph told him. "You already know your brothers are never gonna come here. So why fucking bother with this place at all?"

The other Raph was right. This place wasn't supposed to be like this. He was supposed to be able to control this. But that was the problem, wasn't it? He *couldn't* control it, because he couldn't control *himself*. This place was meant to be something good. Instead, this place was a reflection of himself; volatile, dark, and broken.

Why would his brothers ever want to come here? Why would they want anything to do with him at all? He was a terrible brother. He was a terrible *person*. This place was meant to be good, to be shared. But he would never have anyone to share it with.

“Exactly,” the other Raph said decisively. “This place is fucked, just like you. It would be easier not to think about it. To just forget everything about it.”

Raph threw a hand over his eyes and tried to get enough air into his lungs through his quiet sobbing. This was wrong. This was so fucking wrong. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. They weren’t supposed to be alone. But he already knew he always would be. He had done this to himself.

Raph hated himself for what he knew he was about to do. But it was too much to bear. There was only one way to survive this.

“H-how?” he whispered brokenly. “How do I do it?”

“Like I said before; you’re already halfway there,” the other Raph smirked, then nodded toward the ground beneath Raph. He looked down to see that his legs were gone, obscured by a dark void quickly growing around him. He gasped in fear as he saw it creeping up his waist. His first instinct was to reach out for help, to grab someone who could pull him out. But there was nobody here but himself. The other Raph wasn’t going to help him, because he deserved this. There was no one else here to save him, and that was nobody’s fault but his own. He'd made this bed over a lifetime of fuck-ups, and now it was time to lay in it.

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it!

He sank deeper. The darkness was up to his chest now. He was as terrified as he was ready.

Don’t think about it! Don’t think about it! Don’t think about it!

It was up to his neck. The other Raph looked down at him from somewhere above, a satisfied grin splitting his face. An unnatural, crazed glint in his eyes was the last thing Raph saw before the darkness swallowed him whole.

Raph was on the bed, and the straps were back. He could feel them holding him on his side again. His back and chest burned. Something was touching his good hand.

"R-Raphael," Someone croaked as a thumb ran across Raph's knuckles. It took a few seconds for Raph to realize it was his dad's voice.

"Wha…what's…" Raph mumbled weakly.

"They had to give you the medicine," Splinter whispered thickly. "You were…upset. You hurt yourself. They fix your shell again."

Right. He'd fallen. It had hurt. He'd been trying to…to get to his brothers.

"Dad…" Raph said as urgently as he could, the dregs of the last round of medication keeping him sluggish and unnaturally tired. "Mike and…Don…gotta tell 'em…wasn't Leo."

"Your nurse explained…You…you are *confused,* Raphael," Splinter said miserably, his eyes full of tears.

"No…I saw," Raph argued through the haze. "I *saw,* Dad…it wasn't…wasn't him."

"I saw it, too. I am so sorry, my son, but your brother is…Leonardo is gone," Splinter sobbed, and now the tears were spilling over.

"No," Raph screwed his eyes shut. He couldn't watch his dad cry over something that wasn't real. "You're…wrong."

"I do not want to believe it, either," Splinter cried. "But we cannot lie to ourselves."

"S'not…a… *lie."*

“The doctors say that because of everything that has happened to you, you might have trouble… *processing,"* Splinter said carefully. That was a sort of word Splinter rarely used. Raph could tell he was repeating something he’d been told by someone else.

“No, Dad, you…gotta *listen,"* Raph hissed out. The clearer his head became, the more pain he could feel. He shifted as much as the straps would allow, grunting in frustration at the restriction.

“Stay still, stay still,” Splinter shushed quickly. Raph watched him beckon a nurse over, and she approached with something in her hands. Raph’s breath caught when he saw that it was a syringe.

“Wha…what? N-no, Dad, I don’t—"

“Raphael, you are…confused and upset,” Splinter said, swiping at his own tears. “I cannot let you keep hurting yourself and…and others. The medicine will calm you. This is just until you are healed enough. Then we can help you…understand about Leonardo.”

“No,” Raph growled, feeling angrier and angrier with each word his father spoke. The anger gave him strength, which he used to struggle against the straps holding him in place.

“Please, before he hurts himself!” Splinter said urgently to the nurse reaching for Raph’s IV. He understood what was about to happen a moment too late, crying out as he felt the sedative working its way through him once again.

“It means that I think we will be able to achieve a moderate level of sedation at most. You may still be ‘awake’ but the sedation should make you comfortable and calm enough to not be aware of what’s happening.”

Raph had listened when Dr. Baron explained days ago what the sedative might do, but he really hadn’t thought it would be like *this.*

Time made very little sense as he drifted in and out of reality. (At least, what he *thought* was reality. It was hard to tell.) The things happening around him made even less sense. Sometimes shapes spoke to him. Sometimes he thought he spoke back. Whenever the shapes became people, though, he didn't speak. He *yelled.*

He yelled for them to find Leo. To stop wasting time. To stop looking so sad. To stop ignoring him. To do something. To just *listen* to him.

They never did. If he moved too much or yelled too loudly, they made him stop. Raph was always too slow to try to keep it from happening. The heaviness would return and drag him down.

All anyone ever said to him was that this was for his own safety. That he was a danger to himself and others. He needed to heal, and he couldn't heal if he kept hurting himself. Raph wasn't trying to hurt himself. He *definitely* wasn't trying to hurt anyone else. He just needed to get them to *fucking listen*.

With how hard the drugs made it to speak, though, it was Raph who was doing most of the listening. People always seemed to be coming and going. Raph could barely distinguish between the blurs floating around his room, but occasionally he could pick something out that let him know who was there. Green for his brothers. Pink and gray for his dad. Scruffy blond hair for Woody. When his eyelids were too heavy, sometimes he could hear someone familiar.

"Thank you for giving this to me," came his dad's voice, thick with emotion. "You are sure you do not need it for…for evidence?"

"His phone was thoroughly checked after it was found where he entered the sewers. We believe he was instructed to discard it so he couldn't be tracked with it. There's no need for us to keep it any longer. I'm sure it's very little comfort, but we wanted to make sure it made it back to you."

"No…it *is* a great comfort to have what's…what's left of him," Splinter said brokenly. "Thank you."

Raph caught other snippets of conversation from time to time. Sometimes he could focus just enough to realize he was somewhere different, or that someone was trying to explain something to him.

“This is an MRI machine. It won’t take long, but it’s important that you stay still so we can get clear images, alright?”

He didn’t want to stay still. He wanted to move. He wanted to get up and go look for Leo. But he knew moving would result in more sedatives. The thought made him clench his jaw and swallow hard.

“It’s alright, this makes a lot of people nervous.”

Raph wasn’t nervous. He was angry. Angrier than he’d ever been, and that was saying something. But he couldn’t stand this. If one more person told him that this was all for his own good, he thought he might explode.

Even Donnie and Mikey were telling him this. Disoriented as he was, Raph could never find his voice when they were there. It frustrated him. He had to tell them it wasn’t real. He needed them to understand. They didn’t need to be so upset. And if Splinter wouldn’t listen to him, maybe he would listen to his other sons. Then, maybe he would get back out there and start looking again. Every time they were there, though, Raph could hardly manage more than a few feeble grunts.

It was more than a little surprising, then, when Raph watched the amorphous green blurs floating several feet away begin to take the form of his brothers. The awareness that he was at the tail end of an earlier dose of sedatives was slowly creeping in, and for once, it seemed luck was on his side. The chances of them being here just as the haze was clearing were so, so low. He needed to take advantage of this while he could.

“Don…Mike,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, it’s us, Raph,” Donnie said, hardly above a whisper.

“Gotta…tell you…somethin’.”

“O-okay,” Donnie stammered, adding quickly “just take—take it easy, okay? You can tell us without trying to move, alright?”

Fine. If that was what would get them to listen, then Raph wouldn't move. He blinked up at them.

"You didn't see…on the TV…"

"We didn't," Donnie agreed.

"Donnie, I don't think this is a good idea," Mikey said in a small voice.

"They said letting him talk to us about it might help," Donnie muttered back.

"I don't think I can *do this,* Donnie," Mikey moaned anxiously.

"Mike…it's…can't do what?" Raph asked, not sure they were all having the same conversation right now. He probably needed a few more minutes for the fog to clear to try and talk to his brothers, but he didn't have time. At any moment, someone could decide Raph was *'too agitated'* and shut this all down with another dose.

"Mikey, this *really* sucks, but we gotta at least try," Donnie urged quietly. Mikey was silent for a moment before he sighed.

"…It's nothing, Raph," Mikey finally said, sounding defeated. "What did…um, what did you wanna tell us?"

"The…thing. On TV," Raph panted out. "Wasn't him. It wa…wasn't Leo."

Raph watched Mikey's face crumple before he looked down at the floor. Donnie's shoulders tensed. He too refused to meet Raph's eyes.

"Don't know…why everyone…bought that," Raph said, trying his best to get the words out past the slowly lifting fog. "So…so obvious it…was *faked."*

“I know you…thought what you saw wasn’t real,” Donnie started slowly. “But remember what Dad said about the forensic analysis?”

“The…the what?” Raph didn’t understand.

“Dad talked to you about it the other day. You don’t remember that?”

Raph shook his head. What was Donnie talking about? He knew he’d seen his dad a few times since the video, but Raph couldn’t remember much beyond yelling at him for wasting time.

“Oh…Well, they…um…they had a bunch of experts. Like…digital forensics teams and special effects people look at it…and it…I'm *so* sorry, Raph, but it was real.”

“No. They’re wrong,” Raph said forcefully. He pulled against the straps, wishing he could sit up to be eye level with his brothers.

“Dude, *please* don’t move!”

“You’re gonna believe *them*…instead of *me?"* Raph snapped. “Look…if you guys…if you just watched it, you’d *see*—”

Raph was cut off by the sudden movement of Mikey springing to his feet. He craned his neck sidewise to look up at him, shock and horror in every inch of Mikey’s face.

“…Mikey?”

“H-how could…” Mikey gaped at him, tears already welling in his eyes as he shook and stammered. “How could you a-ask us to *watch* that?”

“It…it’s okay Mikey! I swear…it’s not *real.* You’ll see when…when you watch it.” Raph tried.

“I’m not watching that. I’m *never* watching that,” Mikey said quietly, but adamantly. He was pale as he looked down at Raph in shock.

Raph stared back at him in disbelief. How could Mikey just…just flat-out *refuse* like that? Raph didn’t even know how long he’d been fighting against the sedatives to be able talk to his brothers about this. He’d finally, finally had the chance, and Mikey was just going to *ignore* him? After everything Raph had been through, after everything Leo had sacrificed, Mikey wasn’t even willing to watch a stupid fake video? This was *bullshit.*

Raph felt his face contort into a snarl before he snapped at his brother.

“Stop being such a fucking *baby,* Mikey!”

The stunned hurt on Mikey’s face did nothing to quash Raph’s anger. It only intensified as Mikey silently turned away, walked across the hospital room, and disappeared through the door. With Mikey gone, Raph turned his rage on Donnie, who was still seated and wordlessly gaping at Raph.

“What? Nothing to say? That’s a *first."*

Still silent, Donnie got to his feet. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, seeming for once to be truly speechless. Finally, he clenched his jaw shut before turning away from Raph. Just like Mikey, Donnie strode across the room and walked out the door.

Raph was alone.

Don’t think about it.

Chapter End Notes

SORRY I HAD TO SPLIT THIS UP. Originally this chapter was like over 20k words and spanned the rest of the time between the parade and up to the present. It was just too much, though. Next chapter will be FULL of Leo in a series of vignettes of Raph & Leo's interactions in the dream room over the years, and their mutual downward spirals :)

And man, I am SO SORRY this update took 6 months. A lot of life happened since the previous chapter was posted…half a year ago. I've been dealing with some mystery illness for a few years now. I ended up going to a fancy hospital out of state and finally got a diagnosis and am starting treatment this week.

Also…not gonna lie, the general state of things right now just sucked the creativity right outta me. If you're reading this in the future, the 2024 American presidential election happened between Chapter 19 and 20. Needless to say, things have not been super awesome lately.

I'm also sorry I said this was going to come out last weekend. A guest died at work last week, and I'm the entire marketing department for our company, so I had to handle all of the news and social media surrounding the incident…Obviously it's sad and I feel terrible for the family, but that whole situation completely threw me off my schedule.

I'm far from satisfied with this chapter, but it was time to cut my losses and move on. I'm excited about what's coming up and just really want to get back to having fun with this again.

I'm about to take a couple months off from work, then mostly work from home until fall, so I'll have a lot more time and energy to get back into this story. Thanks for sticking with me through this posting drought. I've reread all your comments a and looked at your fan art a billion times in the past few months, and they have sustained my life force lol. THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Chapter 21: The Parade - Part VI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



Title card art by @milovebisco

“Can you hear me?”

“…yeah,” Raph said, though it was hardly more than a mumble.

"*Raph,* oh my god," Leo said, voice filled with relief. "…been trying…couldn't reach you…don't understand how this…still hear me?"

"Yeah…" Raph said again. Leo was so hard to hear. He was only catching a few words at a time. His mind felt like it was moving too slowly. Way, way too slowly.

"…Leo?"

"….eah…yeah…it's me Raph…"

"Gonna find you," Raph promised through the exhaustion weighing him down.

"I know you will," Leo answered, sounding sure. Raph was sure, too.

They were in this together.

Raph was sitting up again, bolstered up into place like Kim had done…however long ago that was. His arm was still in a sling, the foam block holding it slightly out from his body. Someone was helping him eat. It wasn't Kim. It was…Todd? Yeah, that was right. Todd was one of the male nurses who had been helping him up and out of bed. So why was Todd helping him eat now?

"Where's Kim?" Raph asked as another spoon full of something was lifted toward his face.

"Oh, hey there, bud," Todd said, sounding a little surprised.

"Where's Kim?" Raph repeated.

“She’s with a different patient,” Todd said. He let Raph absorb the information for a moment before trying to get him to eat again. Raph could feel that he was hungry, so he didn’t fight it.

“Thanks,” Raph said as Todd set the tray aside when he was finished.

“You’re welcome,” Todd smiled, which turned playful after a beat. “Nice to hear your *inside* voice again.”

Inside voice? What did…oh. Right. He’d been doing a lot of yelling recently, hadn’t he? The memories of his brief and intermittent periods of lucidity were all accompanied by the sound of his own loud, angry, relentless yelling.

Raph’s first impulse was to apologize, but he wasn’t actually sorry about it. He would’ve stopped if anyone had just listened. But they didn’t, so he’d didn’t stop until they made him. No, Raph really wasn’t sorry at all.

He didn’t love how sore his throat was, though. He reached his free hand up to try rubbing at it. Todd’s own hand shot forward to stop Raph.

“Whoa there, no touching yet,” Todd reprimanded gently. “Your stitches came out this morning.”

“Oh,” Raph said, letting his hand drop and suddenly feeling strangely ashamed. Right. The stitches from where he’d cut his neck on Leo’s swords. He must have been out for their removal. His throat was sore from more than just yelling, apparently. “Sorry.”

“For what, bud?”

Raph didn’t know. Not the yelling, obviously. He was never going to shut up about Leo until someone finally listened to him.

So why wasn’t he yelling right now?

Something felt…different. At first, Raph thought maybe it was the lack of hardware in his shell, or even the fact that his stitches were gone. He could definitely tell the difference in the dosage. He may have still been sluggish and hazy, but this was the most lucid and aware he had felt in a while.

It was something else, though. Everything felt less…urgent. He still knew they were wasting time, that every second spent sitting on their asses was another second Leo was some psychopath kidnapper's prisoner. But Raph couldn't find it within himself to yell right now. He needed to think, and that was pretty hard when he was drugged to the gills.

Todd helped Raph up and to the restroom, then asked if he needed anything else before bed. There were plenty of things Raph needed, none of which Todd could give him. He said nothing, and Todd reminded him of the call button before bidding Raph a good night and leaving.

Alone in his dark hospital room, Raph wished he had asked Todd to leave a light on.

"Raph. *Raph!*"

Leo was shouting what felt like inches from Raph's ear.

"Too loud," Raph grunted. Why was Leo always shouting in here?

"Sorry! It's just that last time you could like, barely hear me."

"I can hear you fine now," Raph said. He felt like it should've come out sounding a little more annoyed than that. He wasn't really annoyed, though.

"Can you see me?" Leo asked.

"No," Raph mumbled as he squinted in the darkness.

“Yeah…I can only kind of see you. And I couldn’t really reach you for a few days,” Leo told him, sounding anxious. “But hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Raph said instantly. He was great, actually. Maybe he couldn’t see anything, but he really liked this place. It was hard not to like it when Leo was here.

“Last time it felt like there was something like, *really* wrong with your shoulder, dude…”

Raph could vaguely recall Leo’s presence inspecting him, finding Raph’s pain, and promptly freaking the fuck out. He didn’t want that to happen again. He could feel Leo surveying him again now, but there was no pain to be found this time.

“It’s fine. Woody fixed it.”

“What? What happened? Who’s Woody?”

“He’s a nerd,” Raph snorted lazily. “Donnie said he’s cool, though.”

“Donnie? He’s okay? And Mikey?” Leo asked urgently.

Raph didn’t like that question. He wished Leo hadn’t asked it. Things started to feel…weird. Hazy.

“Raph? Hey, hey! Raph! Crap crap crap, don’t disappear on me again, dude! RAPH!”

“Leo…?” Leo was here? Yeah, that was…that was right. But…where even was *‘here’*? And what had…what had they been talking about again?

“Yeah, it’s Leo, your *stupid* brother trying not to *stupidly* let himself slip into a *stupid freak out*,” his brother said with a hysterical little tinge. He started speaking in a frantic rush. “Look, Raph, I don’t know what this is or how it works or why this connection or whatever keeps dropping all of a sudden, or why you sound like you’re freaking *drunk* or something. But you gotta tell me *right now* if everyone’s safe, because if I have to keep sitting here wondering if he lied and he’s actually got you

guys stuffed in your own creepy little cells by yourself too, I will freak out *so hard* that I'll literally *die* before he even gets the chance to kill me himself."

Raph was glad he couldn't see Leo. Whenever Leo got like this, he usually went and hid somewhere until he was done 'freaking out'. Raph knew Leo thought he was being sneaky about it most of the time. He also knew that there was a different term for Leo's 'freak outs', but they didn't use that term, because they didn't talk about them. If Leo wanted to talk about them, he wouldn't try so hard to hide them.

Raph didn't want Leo to freak out, but he didn't want to talk about Donnie and Mikey. He didn't know why he didn't want to talk about them, though. He also didn't know why he…what had Leo said? *'Sounded drunk'*. Now that Leo pointed it out, Raph could recognize that it was difficult to think here. His brain felt slow, his thoughts fuzzy. It was hard to get too worked up about it, though.

Leo wanted answers, and answers might keep him from freaking out, so Raph did his best to organize his muddled thoughts enough. But before he tried to give Leo some of the answers he wanted, Raph felt like there was something more important he needed to tell Leo first.

"You're not stupid."

"Uh, okay," Leo said awkwardly. Raph could tell he didn't get it. Actually, it was worse than that. He didn't *believe* it.

"I mean it. You're not stupid," Raph said as forcefully as he could. He meant it, he really did, but it was just…so hard to be anything but flat here.

Leo didn't say anything for a minute. The silence stretched on for so long that Raph slowly began to forget what they had even been talking about. He'd been trying to make a point of something, hadn't he?

"Please just tell me if they're safe, Raph."

Oh, right. Leo had been asking Raph questions, and Raph was trying to keep Leo from freaking out.

“They’re safe.”

“Okay…okay…that’s good. I’m glad they’re alright,” Leo said, and Raph could practically feel him sagging in relief. Raph wished he wasn’t about to ruin it.

“They’re not alright.”

“*Oh god*,” Leo moaned. “They’re safe, but not alright? Does that mean they’re hurt? He said in the earpiece he wouldn’t hurt you guys if I kept you from following me!”

“They’re not hurt.”

“Then why aren’t they alright?”

“Because they’re mad.”

“Mad? What do you mean?”

“They’re mad at me.”

“Raph, I don’t understand—”

Raph grunted in frustration, cutting Leo off. He held a hand to his brow creased in concentration. It was so hard to think! He needed to explain this, but it was *so hard*.

“I don’t…remember this. When I’m not here,” Raph finally parsed out.

“I know,” Leo said miserably after a long beat. “I don’t really know *how* I know, but I do.”

“But…I know you’re still alive.”

"… *'Still'*? Do…do people think I'm *already dead?"*

"Yeah. Everyone does."

"Oh my god," Leo moaned. "No no no no no, oh my god, that's…*oh my god*."

"It's okay, Leo," Raph tried, but Leo cut him off.

"How is it okay?!" Leo said with a hysterical little laugh. "Us getting killed is literally Dad's worst nightmare, he's probably…oh god, dude, *tell me* he's okay and not…not having a freaking *heart attack* or something!"

"He's upset. He's…he…"

"He's what?" Leo asked, his voice panic stricken.

Raph felt strange again. He didn't want to talk about Dad. But Leo was going to freak out. He didn't want that. He needed to answer. He felt his forehead wrinkle even more as he forced out the rest.

"He thinks I'm lying. Donnie and Mikey, too."

"Lying?"

"About you. They don't know it was fake."

"*What* was fake? Dude, I don't know what's wrong with you and I can tell you're trying really hard, but you're still not making a ton of sense right now," Leo said. Raph could tell Leo was trying hard, too. He was trying not to sound like he was panicking. But just like Raph, he was failing miserably.

“Sorry. Really hard to, uh…to think in here.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re asleep,” Leo wondered out loud. Since he couldn’t see his brother, Raph pictured Leo with a nervous hand on his chin. He could tell Leo was trying to think this through and come up with a plan. Leo was good at that. But Raph? Not so much.

“Wait,” Raph finally registered what Leo had said. “I’m asleep?”

“I mean, that’s what you told me like, a couple days ago or however long it’s been. You said you ‘woke up for a minute’ when we were talking in here.”

“Oh. I don’t remember that.”

“You *don’t?*” Leo asked, sounding shocked. “I mean, maybe you don’t remember this stuff when you’re awake…but I thought you remembered when you were here. You obviously remember at least *some* stuff, though…”

“Sorry,” Raph shrugged.

“Okay…no, it’s cool. Everything is *super* cool. This is all super cool and very, *very* normal.”

“You’re such a dork,” Raph snorted. Leo was obviously still on edge, but he sounded at least a little better. Raph was glad.

“Y’know, you sounding like you’re stoned or something would probably be *really* funny if everyone didn’t think I was dead and I wasn’t locked up in the evil lair of some supervillain who wants to kill me.”

“He’s not gonna kill you for real,” Raph said with an eyeroll he wasn’t sure Leo could even see.

“*‘For real?’* What the heck does that mea—” Leo started in confusion, abruptly stopping. Raph could practically hear the dots connecting in Leo’s brain. “Wait. You said something was fake. Do you mean…holy crap, do you mean he *faked my death?!”*

“Yeah,” Raph said, trying to sound apologetic. Instead, it came out mostly flat. It was just…so, so hard to concentrate here. “He killed something that looked like you on TV.”

“Something that looked like…oh…oh my god! *That’s* what the scans were for!”

“The scans?”

“Right after I woke up here, they made me stand still in this weird machine and it was like, taking these super detailed full-body scans of me!” Leo said in a rush.

“That’s not creepy at all,” Raph said.

Finally, Leo laughed. Raph grinned.

“I know, right?” Leo chuckled. “The whole time I was like, *‘what’s even the point of this?’* But holy crap, I wonder if they used them to like, make a hologram of me or something?”

That didn’t sound right, but Raph didn’t really know why. “It looked legit to everyone else I guess.”

“But not *you,* because we’ve been talking here, and *you* know I’m alive.”

“I don’t remember this when I’m awake, though,” Raph said.

“Yeah, but since you knew it was fake you must be like, subconsciously remembering or something.”

“I dunno,” Raph said with a shrug. “Wish I remembered for real.”

“Yeah, man, I do too,” Leo laughed sadly. “But I guess…who would believe you even if you did remember? I mean, that’s why *I* never told anyone…”

“You knew about this?” Raph asked.

“Sort of,” Leo said awkwardly. “This whole thing with talking to you inside my mind or whatever’s happening here is *definitely* new, but…I’ve kinda known something weird was going on with me for a while…”

*It’s just, uh…something **weird** has been happening, and I wanna pick your brain about it.*

“You were gonna tell me,” Raph said suddenly, remembering what Leo had said to him on the float before the parade began.

“I was. Yeah,” Leo sighed. “If I didn’t chicken out, I mean. I was so freaking nervous to try telling you about this.”

“Why?”

“Because dude, how the *heck* was I even gonna be able to explain this without sounding totally insane? Like ‘oh, hey man, funny story, I think I’ve been feeling other people’s feelings for a while now and I maybe might also have some other weird psychic superpowers or something—*”*”

“No,” Raph interrupted. “I mean, why me?”

Leo was quiet for a moment. Raph still couldn’t see Leo, but he could somehow feel something in his brother’s demeanor change.

“Because you’re my best friend,” Leo finally said. His voice was soft and quiet, but full of painfully vulnerable honesty. “I mean, I love Donnie and Mikey, too. You’re all my brothers, but it’s just, I don’t know—”

“No,” Raph said, cutting Leo off once more. “I get it. It’s…same.”

“…wow. *Really,* dude? I’m over here baring my soul, telling you that you’re my *best friend,* and all you can come up with is *‘same’*?” Leo scoffed, his voice indignant but teasing.

“Hey, I’m…I’m *asleep* or some shit,” Raph said defensively.

“Oh, sure,” Leo laughed. “Blame it on the psychic weirdness or whatever’s happening. Y’know, I bet *Donnie* would’ve had more than one freakin’ word to say, and *Mikey* probably would’ve cried! But nope, I just *had* to pick the emotionally constipated brother for a best friend…”

“You are *such a dork*,” Raph said again, this time with an exasperated groan but grinning anyway.

“Yep, that’s it. I’m taking it back,” Leo quipped with feigned anger.

“Yeah right,” Raph snorted.

It should have felt weird for them to both finally acknowledge it. If things were normal, maybe Raph would be embarrassed. Instead, he just felt…relieved. Content. Happy.

“Maybe that’s why I can only reach you…I can’t get Donnie or Mikey in here,” Leo explained. “I swear I can like, *feel* them out there somewhere. But I can’t do this with them. I don’t know why.”

Leo went silent. Too silent. Raph had to strain just to hear his brother trying to not breathe too loudly.

“Leo? Are you okay?”

“Not really,” Leo whispered. “This is…so messed up.”

“I know,” Raph said unhelpfully.

“And if everyone thinks I’m already dead, then nobody’s going to be looking for me.”

“I will.”

Raph reached out blindly to where he thought Leo was. His fingertips connected with something he quickly found was Leo's elbow. He followed his brother's arm up to the shoulder, then gripped it. Raph would've liked to look Leo in the eye as he said this so he could make sure Leo understood, but all he could see was darkness. It didn't matter, though. What he had to say was true whether Leo believed him or not.

"I'll find you."

Todd was there again when Raph woke up. He was healed enough to sit up on his own now. Not only that, but the pins and wires were gone. That must have meant pieces of his shell shifting enough to reopen was no longer a threat. When had Woody been there to determine that? Raph couldn't remember talking to Woody about it, and he was sure Woody would have. Woody liked that Raph wasn't a normal turtle and that he could actually talk. He remembered *that*, at least.

The dosages were gradually being lowered. Someone had explained that at some point, though Raph couldn't recall who it had been or when they had told him this. They may have been tapering off the sedatives, but the dosage was still enough to make him too unsteady on his feet to walk to the restroom unassisted.

After Todd was finished helping Raph to and from the bathroom, a new doctor came to see him. At least, he said he was a doctor. He didn't have a white coat or scrubs. He had an argyle sweater and expensive looking shoes. He sat in the chair the closest to his bed, the one his brothers, dad, and April had used. Raph hadn't seen them for a while. Raph wished the doctor wouldn't sit there. They would want it when they came back.

The doctor didn't want to run any tests. He didn't ask to look at any of Raph's wounds. Instead, he just talked. He talked about loss and grief. He talked about acceptance. He said Raph could talk to him. He promised Raph could tell him whatever he wanted to.

So, Raph told him to fuck off.

"But like, why fake my death?"

Raph was with Leo again. From the way Leo was speaking, he'd been here for a little while already. He tried to catch up on the conversation they were apparently already in the middle of.

"So they can milk you, probably," Raph said. There was more to it than that. What had…what had April said?

"But why just me? Why not you guys, too? Unless…unless it's because I have *this,*" Leo finally mumbled, tapping his head with one finger. It was still a bit fuzzy and hard to make out, but Raph could actually kind of see Leo now. Raph was glad Leo seemed to have an idea himself, because he was struggling to remember everything April had laid out. It had all made enough sense to Raph at the time, but he had no idea how he was going to explain April's complex theory while he could barely speak in complete sentences in this place.

"What even is it?"

"I'm not really sure. Like I said last time, I've been like, feeling this stuff for a while now. And I was kinda…freaking out pretty hard when I woke up here and couldn't figure out how to escape. So I tried some of the stuff from my meditation book to try and like, calm down or whatever," Leo said quickly and awkwardly. "But once I did, I started to feel like…like something was different, and I realized everything was dark and I wasn't in the cell anymore. Which like, should've *really* made me freak out, y'know? But I could feel something else there with me, and somehow, I just like, *knew* it was you. Even though I couldn't see you."

"I felt you there, too," Raph told him.

"You remember that?"

"Kinda. Didn't know it was you, though."

"Not at first, sure, but you definitely knew by the next time."

"Yeah. The time when…when I grabbed you," Raph said slowly, trying to piece together the foggy memory. Leo had been…upset? Upset over what? And why had Raph grabbed him?

“Yeah, uh, about that…” Leo started, trailing off nervously. “I’m sorry I freaked out so bad and that… y’know…”

Raph wasn’t entirely sure what Leo was talking about, but he wasn’t all that concerned. More than anything, he was surprised Leo was actually talking about freaking out. This was the most directly he had ever spoken about it that Raph could remember. This was uncharted territory, and Raph didn’t know what to say or do. A mumbled “it’s cool” and an awkward shrug was the best he could come up with.

“Yeah…okay. Well, thanks for, y’know, being there and uh, helping me out.”

“We’re not supposed to be alone,” Raph said automatically and emphatically.

“What do you mean?” Leo said, sounding surprised.

Raph didn’t really know. He just shrugged again. To Raph’s own surprise, Leo didn’t move the conversation away from what had happened the second time they met here.

“I was just, y’know…frustrated with myself.”

“Why?”

“Because I couldn’t figure out how to talk to you. But you grabbed me, and that made me realize we could be physical here. But!” Leo said, voice perking up. “Now that we can talk, maybe we can figure out how to get me the heck outta here! I mean, I don’t really know where ‘here’ is, but—"

“You don’t?” Raph interrupted. How the hell was he going to find Leo if not even *Leo* knew where he was?

“Literally *no* idea, dude,” Leo told him with a nervous little chuckle. “The guy from the parade was just feeding me directions through the earpiece for which sewer tunnels to take until I got to some big passage. And then those armored guys from TCRI were in there and jumped me. Eyepatch knocked me out like he did last time, and I woke up in this weird cell thing.”

Leo was talking too fast. Raph felt like he was only absorbing every other word. He hated how slow his brain felt here. It took him a moment to understand everything Leo had said.

“Eyepatch?”

“You know, that big TCRI dude from before! The one with the eyepatch! I haven’t heard anyone call him by a name, just ‘yes, sir’ and stuff. So I’ve just kinda been like, calling him ‘Eyepatch’ in my head.”

“Oh,” Raph said stupidly. He wished his thoughts weren’t so slow here. Sluggishly, he realized something. “April was right.”

“April?” Leo said, his voice perking up even more.

“She thought TCRI was involved.”

“Of course she was right! That’s April for you,” Leo said smugly through the dopey grin on his face. Gross. Raph was glad his vision was still pretty blurry in this place.

“People didn’t believe her, though. Just me.”

“Seriously?” Leo scoffed, incredulous.

“She thinks they’re working together.”

“You mean TCRI and the guy from the parade?”

“Yeah.”

“That makes *total* sense, dude,” Leo said excitedly. “Like, this is *definitely* a different location, but the guards are all in that weird armor with the purple vizors like they were at TCRI.”

“Wish I could tell her she was right,” Raph mumbled, immediately regretting being so frustrated when Leo had finally lightened up. He couldn’t help it, though. The way his mind worked here was driving him crazy. Why couldn’t he remember this when he woke up? And why was he only remembering *some* of the stuff that happened here? It made him want to hit his head against the nonexistent walls.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Leo said, interrupting Raph’s thoughts. “Once I get out of here, you and April can rub it in everyone’s faces that you were right. You both *do* really love gloating.”

Raph laughed. Leo wasn’t wrong.

“Can’t wait,” Raph grinned.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “Me either.”

Physical therapy began. The sling his right arm was in was different now. It had more give to it, and the foam block was gone. Removing it for PT was one of the most satisfying things Raph had ever felt. He didn’t even mind the sting, because moving it again felt good.

And good feelings were getting harder and harder to come by.

When he was taken back to his room after his first PT appointment, he saw the TV on his wall had been removed. In its place, they had wheeled a tube TV in on a heavy metal stand. It looked decades old. It had a VCR built in, and the antenna had been removed. Someone had brought in a box of VHS tapes for him to watch. They apologized for how old it was, that it didn’t have streaming or cable. Nobody said why, but Raph wasn’t stupid. Without internet, cable, or even analog antennas, someone would have a *really* hard time hacking this ancient hunk of junk.

It didn’t really bother him. It reminded him of the small TV he and his brothers had in their room growing up. Raph even felt a little flutter of nostalgia at the sound of Todd sliding a tape into the VCR.

“Do you, um…” Raph began to as Todd, but lost his train of thought almost immediately watching Todd fast forward through the previews.

“What’s up, buddy?”

“…what?” When had Todd gotten so close? Hadn’t he just been next to the TV?

“You were about to ask me something,” Todd said gently from the seat beside Raph’s bed.

He was? What had he been about to…what did…oh. Oh, right. Raph remembered now.

“Do you, uh…know when Donnie and Mikey are coming back?”

“They’re back in school now. That’s why you haven’t seen them around.”

“…okay.”

Raph glanced at the clock. It was 6pm. School let out hours ago. Maybe they had after school clubs or something. Or…or maybe Raph kept falling asleep before they got here. He’d have to make an effort to stay awake longer from now on. He wanted to be awake when they came back.

Todd had handed Raph the remote. He had expertly paused it on the Paramount Pictures title card so Raph could hit play when he was ready. Raph did so when Todd left, but only half-watched as a jungle appeared on the screen. It was followed by an ancient temple, then booby traps and heroic music. Oh. Yeah. Indiana Jones. He’d seen this, but it had been a long time.

While an evil French guy stole a golden idol from Indiana Jones, Raph stole a glance at the door. As Indy’s plane flew halfway around the world for Cairo, Raph tried to picture which route his brothers would take to get to the hospital from Eastman.

Raph only found himself fully paying attention when suddenly, Indy was stuck in a cavernous underground chamber surrounded by snakes. The evil French asshole peered down at him from the entrance in the ceiling above.

"What a fitting end to your life's pursuits. You're about to become a permanent addition to this archeological find."

Indy's reluctant companion Marion was tossed down into the pit with him, and the Frenchman and his Nazi scum comrades slid the stone slab over the entrance. Indy and Marion were sealed inside, trapped with the snakes in the darkness.

Raph hit the power button.

Why keep watching? Why even try to stay awake? Somewhere between Marion's drinking contest in Nepal and the Nazi monkey, Raph had finally accepted reality. His brothers weren't coming. Not tonight, and not any other night.

Raph laid down and turned his back toward the door.

"Raph! Holy crap dude, you are *not* gonna believe this," Leo said, excitement in his face visible through the darkness.

"What?"

"I'm freaking *telepathic!"*

"You're…what?"

"Telepathic! You know, like, communicating and stuff with your mind! Cynthia said so! That's what *this is!"* Leo said, rapidly pointing back and forth between himself and Raph.

Raph didn't know what to make of that. It sounded stupid. Like something out of one of Donnie's dumb shows.

"She also said I have 'empathic abilities', which I guess is like, feeling *other* people's feelings or something?" Leo said in a rush. "At least I *think* that's what she was saying. You remember how she talks. She sounds like, *so* crazy half the time. But I mean, I thought *I* was going crazy until she said that, but this makes *so* much sense now!"

"Leo," Raph said flatly. "This makes literally zero sense."

"No, it *totally* does, dude! I thought maybe I was going crazy, because for a while now it's seemed like I can actually feel what *other* people are feeling. Especially with you and Donnie and Mikey."

"Really?"

"Yeah…it was kinda overwhelming most of the time, to be honest. That's why I've been kinda keeping to myself recently…I thought maybe like, getting some space and some meditation would help, but it's just been getting worse. Or stronger, I guess. Cynthia said it's *'more advanced'* than it was the first time they had us."

"How would she know that?"

"They ran some tests or something while we were unconscious, apparently," Leo explained. "They saw it in my results, but not with you guys. I could just barely hear them, but they were saying something about how we were exposed to the ooze in an 'uncontrolled environment', so that might've made our mutations 'manifest differently'. So like…maybe I'm the only one who has this, and maybe that's why they only took *me* this time."

"They were gonna milk all of us before, though," Raph said. It didn't make sense. If the only wanted Leo's blood, then why did they bother with the rest of them the first time?

"I don't think they knew about this at first. I think they really did just want to make more mutants, but like, maybe they decided this was more important once they found it? I'm not sure why they want this, uh…*ability* or whatever. If they want mutant super soldiers, I don't know how being able to tell when someone else is *sad* is supposed to help in a fight," Leo said with a scoff. "But I dunno, it

sounds like it has something to do with this guy Cynthia was complaining about. *'The Shredder'* or something."

"*'The Shredder'*? Seriously?" Raph laughed.

"Yeah, I know," Leo chucked back with an eye roll. "He sounds like an 80s wrestler. She was ranting about some deal she made with him. That's *gotta* be the guy from the parade, right?"

Raph felt like he ought to have something to tell Leo right then, but couldn't think of what it might be. Whatever it was, there was no way it could be any more important than everything Leo was telling him right now. He let it slip away.

"You seen him yet?"

"No," Leo shook his head. "I've barely seen anyone. They've only taken me out of here twice so far."

"To milk you?"

"No, once for those body scans right at the beginning, then again today when some scientists made me sit with this thing on my head while they took some readings I guess. Cynthia was there ranting about the results and how she was sick of waiting to milk me. I don't know what they're waiting for, though."

"The Shredder?" Raph suggested.

"Yeah, maybe. I kinda wish he'd just hurry up already, to be honest."

"What? Why?"

"I mean, don't get me wrong dude; I'm definitely not looking forward to being milked. But the waiting is driving me crazy, and I don't know…I'm sure it'll freaking *suck*, but I'm starting to feel like literally anything would be better than having to just sit here staring at the wall forever," Leo said with a frantic little chuckle.

“What do you mean?”

“They just kinda left me in here with nothing to do and I’m beginning to go a little stir crazy, I guess. Food just like, appears in this little cubby in the wall that opens sometimes, and there’s a sink and a toilet and this crappy little bed roll thing on the floor, but that’s literally *it*, dude. I never thought getting kidnapped would be this freaking *boring*.”

“Oh. That sucks,” Raph commiserated. Of all the terrible things Raph would have thought Leo could be experiencing in his captivity, boredom hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“Yeah, I don’t think entertainment was a high priority when designing the prison cells in their evil super villain lair,” Leo chuckled weakly. “At least now I can talk to you again for something to do. Well, when you’re asleep, that is.”

“Sorry,” Raph said. It felt inadequate, but he didn’t know what else to say.

“Hey, don’t be sorry, man,” Leo smiled. “I’m just glad I’m not totally alone here.”

Even though Leo had just said that talking to Raph was his only entertainment, they lapsed into a momentary silence.

“I wish I could talk to Donnie and Mikey,” Leo said after a while. “I really miss them.”

Raph missed them, too.

“Pizza delivery!”

Woody was walking through the door, pizza box perched proudly on one hand. He strode over to Raph’s bed and opened the box with a dramatic flourish. Raph peered inside. It was Spinach and artichoke.

“Aw man, did I get it wrong?” Woody asked when Raph said nothing. “I thought this was your favorite.”

“No, it is,” Raph assured him. “But I don’t remember telling you that.”

“Oh,” Woody said, looking a little confused. “It was just the other day. You said it was your favorite, but you never order it because your brothers say it’s ‘pretentious’. I promised I’d bring it to celebrate getting outta the sling!”

“Right…” Raph mumbled, still sifting through the fuzzy memories to try figuring out when he’d told Woody about his pizza preferences. Everything had been so hazy for the last…however long it had been. It was becoming easier to think now that the medication was being tapered off.

Raph wasn’t sure getting out of the sling was something really worth celebrating. His injury had been his own fault, after all. But as Woody set the box down on the tray attached to the hospital bed and the tantalizing smell of the pizza inside hit him, Raph decided he didn’t really care. He reached in for a slice, relishing in the fact that he could finally use his dominant hand again.

“This is so good, holy shi—crap,” Raph said, catching himself a little too late. Woody barked out a laugh.

“It’s chill, buddy. I know I should because I’m like, technically an adult, but I’m not gonna scold you for cussing,” Woody grinned.

It was Raph’s turn to laugh. “What the hell does *‘technically an adult’* mean?”

“Listen,” Woody said, leaning in with a low, conspiratorial tone. “Nobody ever tells you this about getting older, but you never really stop feeling like you’re just a kid trapped in an adult’s body. Like, you go to work and sit down at your desk and think to yourself *‘how am I getting away with this? Who let **me** have responsibilities? How is this even allowed?’”*

Raph snorted through a mouthful of pizza at the image of a much younger Woody sitting behind an office desk, teenage acne and all, looking confused as to how he got there.

“I’m serious! Like, I still can’t believe that outta all the options out there, they were like *‘hey you; the pizza delivery boy pretending to be a 35-year-old veterinarian! Yes, we need **you** to come help one of the most famous people alive.’* Absolutely *bonkers,* my dude.”

Raph was sure telling your patient how unqualified you felt was about as unprofessional as you could get, but that was exactly what he liked about Woody.

“You used to deliver pizzas?”

“Yup, all through undergrad. It was actually a pretty good gig, all things considered. Still can’t believe Rupert never fired me, though! I stole like, *so* many breadsticks, man,” Woody said with a wistful little smile as he shook his head.

Raph couldn’t help but cackle at that. He almost wanted to tell Woody how many pizzas he and his brothers had stolen over the years (or ‘*borrowed*’ as Leo and Mikey liked to put it), but instead he just listened as Woody launched into a series of stories of some of his more harrowing and bizarre deliveries.

As Woody recounted the tale of delivering to a party hosted by a university ski club that somehow ended in him being invited inside for a shotski *(“It’s like, a bunch of shot glasses glued to a literal ski, so you and like 4 other people gotta stand shoulder to shoulder and tip it back at the same time so it doesn’t spill all over your faces! It was crazy!”*), Raph felt his shoulders slowly untensing for the first time in what felt like weeks.

When was the last time someone had talked to him about something other than his injuries? How long had it been since anyone had looked at him without pity or frustration over his refusal to give up on Leo? Maybe it *had* happened at some point, but he hadn’t been lucid enough to recognize or remember it. As far as Raph was concerned, this was the first normal conversation he’d had with anyone since Thanksgiving.

Raph found himself smiling a real, genuine smile. He didn’t even let it waiver when he realized how much his brothers would probably like Woody’s stories too. Things wouldn’t be like this forever. They’d bring Leo home soon, and Raph would patch things up with Donnie and Mikey.

Raph took another slice, feeling like maybe everything wasn’t as broken as it seemed.

Leo was curled up on the floor. He was crying.

"Leo?"

Raph bent down, not sure if he should touch Leo. His brother looked bad. Really bad. His face was contorted in pain, his eyes screwed tightly shut. He sucked in sharp breaths between gritted teeth, only unclenching his jaw every so often to let out a few gut-wrenching sobs.

"Leo, what's wrong?"

"*Hurts*," Leo rasped. His breath came in short huffs, as if breathing too deeply would hurt him even more. Raph knew the feeling.

"What happened?"

"Mil…milking…"

It had hurt when Raph had been milked before, but it hadn't been *this* bad. But right now, Leo looked almost as bad as Raph had felt after being shot.

"M-machine is…different," Leo gasped from his place on the floor, as if he had heard what Raph was thinking.

"Shit," Raph said. He wondered why it would be different. Maybe…maybe because Leo's mutation was somehow different? That was what Leo had told him before, right? It was difficult to remember. He supposed it didn't matter. Whatever it was about this machine that was different, it clearly hurt much worse than the first one.

Raph didn't know what to do, or how to help. Leo was obviously in too much pain to bear. It may have been hard to remember what happened here in this strange place Leo kept bringing him to, but

Raph could remember other things. He remembered what had helped him the last time he himself had been hurting this badly.

Raph crossed his legs beneath himself as he sat beside Leo. He reached out to place his hand on Leo's head, rubbing it gently. Just like his dad had done to Raph after the…the surgery. He hoped it helped Leo like it had helped him.

Leo kept crying. Raph kept rubbing. Neither said anything more.

Chapter End Notes

I'll come back and add links for all the new fanart since last chapter, I'm 100% posting this like 20 minutes before midnight because I just needed it to be DONE.

Remember when I thought this flashback arc would be 3 chapters? lol

Chapter 22: The Parade - Part VII

Chapter Summary

Content warning:

Panic attacks, medical procedure without consent, threats of institutionalization, loss of autonomy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



Title card art by @milovebisco

They were finally letting Raph walk back from the physical therapy wing of the hospital to his room. Up until today, they had been making him sit in a wheelchair to be taken back and forth to his PT sessions. But now that the dosages had finally been lowered enough that Raph could walk in a straight line, he enjoyed the chance to really stretch his legs for once.

Raph's satisfaction was short lived. When he finally arrived back at his room, he found it already occupied. His dad was there, along with that fake-ass doctor with the too-fancy shoes. He was wearing another stupid sweater. Today it was maroon. Raph was sure he'd seen this asshole wear one in every color of the rainbow at this point. That wasn't even counting all the patterned ones.

Raph had to focus his anger on those stupid fucking sweaters each time the guy showed up. If he didn't, he'd end up losing it. If he lost it, they'd increase the meds again. If they increased the meds again, Raph would lose it more. If he let that cycle continue, he'd never get the fuck outta here. If he never got the fuck outta here, he'd never find Leo.

And so Raph once again channeled all of his anger and frustration into memorizing every last thread of this stupid sweater and adding it to his mental catalogue of Sweater Asshole's closet.

He knew by now that there was no getting out of this. He'd just have to sit here and wait out this Mr. Rogers wannabe. He'd get tired of Raph's stubbornness eventually. Everyone else did.

"Don't know why you keep dragging this quack in here, Dad," Raph said with a huff as he sat down on his bed.

"Raphael, please…" Splinter said weakly. "He is here to help, since you are still…having trouble accepting what has happened."

"Because it wasn't even *real*—"

"Let's not talk about Leonardo today," Sweater Asshole suggested. "You just came back from PT, right? How'd that go?"

“It went fine.”

“Your physical therapist says you seem to enjoy it.”

“Yeah, cuz I actually get to fucking *move*.”

“Raphael! Language!” Splinter hissed.

Sweater Asshole just ignored it. “I’m sure it does feel nice to finally get some physical activity in, especially for someone as active and athletic as you. Can you tell me how you feel about your injury when you’re at PT?”

Raph wanted to groan. Why was this asshole so obsessed with this? He rolled his eyes as he responded. “I already told you. It’s not a big deal. People get hurt every day.”

“Yes, they do,” the Sweater Asshole agreed. “But *you* do not get hurt every day.”

Raph immediately tamped down the uneasy feeling that bloomed in his chest at those words. He didn’t have time for any of this. “Seriously, *why* are we even talking about this? Like, sure, whatever, I got shot. But Leo got *fucking kidnapped*. Why am I the only one who gets which one of those is the bigger deal here?”

“No, not ‘whatever’,” Splinter interjected. “Raphael, you—”

“God, this is such a waste of time! What’re you even doing here, Dad? *Leo’s* the one who needs you right now, not *me*,” Raph spat.

If Raph wasn’t so frustrated with everyone right now, maybe he would’ve felt a little bad about the way his dad’s face crumpled. But if guilt tripping him is what it took to get Splinter to finally get up and leave, then so be it.

When Splinter closed the door behind him, the shrink sighed. Raph tuned him out as he launched into another lecture about “his word and actions affecting others”, as if that was the whole damn point of what he was doing. *Someone* had to keep reminding everyone not to give up on Leo. If they all thought Raph was ever going to back down on this, then *they* were the crazy ones. Not him. Raph wasn’t crazy. Not about Leo, and not about his stupid injury. He didn’t start paying attention again until he heard Leo’s name.

“I know I said we weren’t going to talk about Leonardo today, but I want to circle back to something you said a minute ago. You implied that Leo was the one who needed help, not you. Do you understand what you’re doing when you say things like this?”

“Yeah, I’m stating the fucking obvious,” Raph snapped.

“What you’re doing,” the shrink said, ignoring Raph’s retort, “is minimizing what’s happened to *you* by shifting the focus onto someone else.”

Raph said nothing. He wasn’t ‘minimizing’ anything, because there was nothing there in the first place. He was fine.

Raph tuned out Sweater Asshole when he started talking about the surgery. He didn’t want to think about—no, he didn’t *need* to think about it, because it didn’t matter. It was over. It was in the past, just like all of the rest of this would be soon. He was healing well. He was doing great at PT. Pretty soon, he’d be using his arm again like nothing ever happened.

But Leo was still missing. If this asshole shrink couldn’t understand why that was more important than Raph’s stupid shoulder, then there was no point in listening to whatever garbage he was spewing out. Raph continued to ignore him, running out the clock until it was time for him to go bother someone else. Raph felt a little surge of satisfaction at the shrink’s poorly concealed sigh of defeat as he finally got up to leave.

When he was finally alone, Raph grabbed at the hem of his shirt. They’d started letting him wear normal t-shirts again once he’d been steady on his feet enough to undress and shower on his own. He peeled it up over his head, ignoring the slight sting of the mostly healed muscles on his right side.

Raph looked down at his plastron to see the patchwork of cracks on his upper right scute. Woody had done a good job of color matching the dye for the epoxy that filled some of the larger gaps, but Raph could still tell which parts were real and which were fake if he looked hard enough.

And he *did* look hard. He even reached up to touch it. He had to show them that it didn't bother him. He didn't have a problem with it. He could look at it. He could touch it. It *really* didn't bother him. It wasn't a big deal. It was fine.

He was fine.

"Raph?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks," Leo said. His voice was small and subdued, nothing like a few visits ago when Leo had been excited to tell Raph what he'd learned from the tests Cynthia's scientists ran.

"For what?" Raph asked.

"For last time. Sorry I cried all over you."

"It's okay. I don't mind," Raph said honestly.

"I can't *believe* I said before that I wish they'd hurry up with the milking…" Leo mumbled, throwing a hand over his face and cringing in embarrassment.

"You didn't know it was gonna be worse," Raph shrugged. Mikey had been pretty dramatic about it when he'd been milked at TCRI, but 'dramatic' was basically Mikey's whole schtick. Raph had been milked himself, so he knew that whatever they were doing to Leo now, it was definitely *much* worse than what he and Mikey had endured.

The silence stretched on. Raph didn't mind this, either. He liked talking to Leo here, of course. But just being in this place with him was nice, too. He was sure Leo felt the same way. It *hadn't* been nice to see Leo in that much pain last time he was here, but Raph had still been glad to sit with Leo while

he cried anyway. He didn't want Leo to be alone while he was hurting, even if there was nothing he could do about the pain itself. After all, he knew first-hand how much it helped. He also knew how much worse it hurt to be left to bear the pain alone.

Raph felt a quick, sharp pang in his chest at the thought.

"What's wrong?"

Raph startled hearing the question. He looked over to watch Leo slowly peel himself off the floor where he had been laying on his back. With how much effort it seemed to take and the way he winced as he settled into a sitting position, it was obvious that Leo was still hurting from the milking the other day. Despite his own discomfort, he was looking at Raph's chest worriedly.

Oh. Right. Leo could feel other people's feelings. How had Raph forgotten that? The only option there was here was honesty. There was no point in trying to lie about how he felt, because Leo already knew. That still didn't mean he wanted to talk about it, though.

"Don't worry about it," he shrugged.

"Too late, dude," Leo laughed softly. He was trying hard to sound lighthearted, but Raph could see the concern behind Leo's forced little smile. "C'mon, don't leave me hanging here. What's wrong?"

"…Everyone's still mad."

'At me' was left unsaid, but Raph supposed it didn't matter. Leo's face fell.

"God, Raph, I am *so sorry*," Leo said, sounding equal parts apologetic and miserable. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about what this must be like on your end, and I can't even…Dude, I can't even *imagine* how confusing it must be when you're awake since you don't remember any of this, but you still know that I'm, y'know…"

It was Leo's turn to leave a sentence unfinished. Raph didn't have any problem saying it for him, though. He'd been saying it nonstop to anyone who would listen whenever he was awake and lucid enough to do so.

“That you’re not dead.”

“Yeah…that.”

“It’s not,” Raph shrugged again, but Leo obviously didn’t understand. Raph wanted to clarify, but with how slowly his brain worked here, that was going to be a challenge. After several moments of focusing as hard as he could, he tried again. “It’s not confusing.”

“…How is that not confusing?”

“It just *isn’t*, alright?” Raph snapped angrily. He didn’t know how to explain this to Leo. He didn’t know how to explain this to *anyone*. He growled in aggravation, rubbing furiously at his head.

“Sorry, sorry,” Leo said quickly.

“I’m not *confused*,” he snarled through gritted teeth.

Raph wasn’t sure at what point he had stood up, but he was now on his feet. He dropped his hands to look down at Leo where he still sat on the floor. His brother was looking back at him with that focused, searching expression that Raph had seen so many times before. After a moment, Leo nodded gently and spoke.

“Okay.”

The tension Raph had felt building in his chest gave way to surprise; not just at Leo’s reply, but his sudden calmness, too. Leo did not seem at all threatened by the fact that Raph was on his feet and very clearly angry. He was so unbothered, in fact, that he shot Raph a soft smile before gingerly maneuvering himself back down to lay on the floor again.

“…Okay?” Raph repeated, unsure and apprehensive.

“Yeah,” Leo answered from the ground. He’d shut his eyes again, looking relaxed as possible with how sore he still must have been. “I believe you, dude.”

Raph’s shoulders dropped. He felt lightheaded with how quickly the fight drained out of him, and he wished there was something here to hold onto to steady himself. The only thing here was Leo, though, so Raph folded his legs underneath himself to join him on the floor. Leo seemed to be giving Raph some time to calm down before he spoke again.

“Look…I know it’s hard for you to think or talk super clearly here, and I can feel how much it frustrates you,” Leo said with a level voice, tilting his head and opening his eyes to look over at Raph. He brought a hand to his own head and tapped it. “I mean, I don’t really know how to explain these powers or whatever they are, or like, all the weird stuff that’s happening wherever it is I am. But you believe me about all this anyway, right?”

“Yeah, I do,” Raph said automatically.

“Exactly,” Leo smiled. “So, you don’t have to try to explain anything, either, okay? You say that you’re not confused when you’re awake, then I believe you.”

Raph shouldn’t have been embarrassed by the sudden wetness in his eyes — especially not after he caught a glimpse of Leo’s getting just as glossy — but he still hurried to turn his head away before swiping at his face.

Raph breathed in the not-so-fresh city air as he stepped out of the hospital. Finally having been cleared to leave, Raph had expected the actual act of crossing the threshold back into the outside world to be a little more satisfying than this. Instead, the whole affair was painfully awkward and tense.

It had been explained that somehow, despite all the security measures, word had gotten out that he was being released this week. A mob of reporters and paparazzi had been camped out at all the major exits for days now, so Raph was being escorted out through a maintenance exit that let out a few yards from a collection of dumpsters.

There was a large SUV waiting for Raph and Splinter. They squeezed in quickly and silently. It wasn’t until they were a few blocks from the hospital that Raph finally spoke.

“Who’s even paying for all this?” Raph asked, his hand running over the leather interior of the car.

“Do not worry about that,” Splinter sighed. “The only thing you need to worry about is getting better.”

“I’m outta the hospital, aren’t I?” Raph shot back.

“You know this is not what I mean,” Splinter said, his voice exhausted. “You are confused, but—”

“It’s *everyone else* who’s—” Raph cut in, but Splinter interrupted *his* interruption.

“You are *confused*,” he repeated, firm and sharp. “And we will do whatever we can to help you understand what has happened. But just because you are hurt like this does not mean *you* can keep hurting your brothers.”

“Dad, I’m not—”

“*Raphael*,” Splinter bit out sharply. “You will not ask them again to watch the video. You. Will. *Not*.”

Raph didn’t say anything else the entire car ride home. Maybe he wouldn’t ask them to watch it, but he wasn’t just *giving up*. One way or another, he’d figure out how to get everyone to fucking snap out of it.

The car came to a stop, and Raph silently followed his dad out onto the sidewalk. They’d been let out in front of Marty’s bodega. The dingy and faded awning was a familiar sight Raph hadn’t known he had missed. The massive store owner stepped out, and Raph braced for his booming voice.

“It’s good to see you, Raphael.”

It was the softest Raph had ever heard Marty say something. Until then, Raph hadn’t thought he was even *capable* of speaking below a mild shout. The comforting familiarity he’d felt seeing the store

vanished.

"Uh, you too," Raph said awkwardly. He didn't know how to react to this strange, quieter version of Marty.

Marty lingered, looking like he had more to say, but seemed to think better of it. Instead, he ducked back into the store and came out a moment later with two heavy plastic bags filled to the brim. He passed them to Splinter with a firm nod.

"Thank you," Splinter said quietly. "For this, and for all of your help during everything."

"Pah, it's nothing. Neighbors help neighbors," the shop owner scoffed, waving a dismissive hand theatrically. The gesture made him seem a bit more like the Marty Raph knew, but the softness of his voice left Raph feeling unsettled. He just stood there awkwardly until Splinter turned to leave, and Raph followed him around the corner to their manhole cover. He used his good arm to lift most of its weight, ignoring Splinter's sounds of concern and disapproval.

"I got it," Raph grumbled. It always took Splinter forever to get it open, and Raph was eager to finally get back to the Lair. Raph had crashed overnight at Tim's or other friends' places a few times for fun, but he'd never been away from home this long. After a couple weeks in the hospital and being under constant supervision, Raph wanted nothing more than to faceplant into his bed and enjoy the privacy of his own room.

The moment they were underground, it all hit Raph at once. The smell of damp concrete, the distant hum of pipes, the familiar grit beneath his feet. This was *home.*

At least, it should have been. Stepping into the Lair, Raph tried to keep his face neutral as an unmistakable feeling of wrongness washed over him. He had known it would feel weird without Leo there, but he hadn't expected his brother's absence to be this immediately and overwhelmingly apparent. Small and cramped as it was, the Lair had always felt cozy. Now, it just felt empty.

Raph didn't help Splinter put the groceries away. He wandered past Donnie and Mikey's closed doors to find his own. Raph's stomach lurched when he saw that someone had come in to tidy up his room. He was sure that whoever it was, they had meant well. Nevertheless, the fact that somebody had entered his space uninvited and messed with his stuff left Raph feeling weirdly…upset.

Why was he upset, though? It wasn't a big deal. All they'd done was pick up his dirty clothes and make his bed. They'd been trying to do something nice for him. Maybe they thought his arm would still be too sore to clean up himself. So what if his room didn't look exactly the way he'd left it? It was still his room. It was fine. Finding it like this had just…caught him off guard. It had been a long day. Splinter had been stressing him out. He was just…tired. Really tired.

He didn't faceplant into his bed like he'd wanted to for the past few weeks. Instead, he carefully pulled back the blankets someone had made way too neatly. On his bed. That someone else had made. Without asking him.

It was fine. It didn't matter.

What *did* matter was finding Leo, so Raph pulled up the blankets and forced himself to ignore the uneasiness in his chest. He wouldn't be in bed for long, anyway. He'd be out of it as soon as everyone else in the Lair were in their own beds.

Because wherever he was, Leo had waited long enough. It was time to get to work.

"Can you fight your way out?" Raph asked Leo. His brother shook his head and sighed.

"I mean, I tried the last few times they took me out of here. But I can only ever get a kick or two in before—"

Leo stopped abruptly, but Raph pressed. "Before what?"

"…uh, remember how Cynthia used a remote to make the restraints on the milking machine shock us? Well, they slapped these weird cuff things on me that like, do the same thing, and they're controlled with a remote just like the restraints were. So, y'know, if I fight them off or try to run—"

Leo mimicked holding a remote and pressing a button while making a cartoonish buzzing noise.

“Are you fucking *kidding me?*” Raph gaped, incredulous.

“I wish I was, dude. But like, there’s only one remote as far as I can tell. I think my best shot is breaking free when they’re moving me to the lab and taking out whoever has it. I just haven’t been fast enough yet…It’s pretty much always Eyepatch who does, and he’s *reeeeal* trigger happy with it…”

“Like I didn’t already hate that guy enough,” Raph growled.

“Tell me about it,” Leo chuckled weakly. “The cuffs were already on when I woke up in the cell, so I don’t know how they come off. I tried messing with them to see if I can get them off, but I guess that triggers them even without the remote. I don’t think I could get them off even if they didn’t, though.”

“Dude. This is like, *so* fucked up.”

“Yeah, I know,” Leo said with a weary, heavy sigh. He was looking down at his wrists, rubbing at them nervously.

As Leo did so, Raph’s muddled mind slowly registered that he could not actually see the cuffs Leo was describing. Instead, he watched as Leo’s fingers fiddled anxiously with the fabric of his wristbands. Raph squinted at them, confusion creeping in alongside a building awareness.

Leo had not been wearing his wristbands at the parade. The only pieces of their regular gear any of them had worn with their suits that day had been their masks. Now, however, Leo had all his usual ninja gear. The only things missing were his swords.

The thought finally occurred to Raph to look down at his own arms. Sure enough, red sweatbands were wrapped snugly around his wrists. He stretched his arms out to see matching elbow wraps. Slowly, he brought his arms back to himself, his fingers finding the leather of the belt around his waist. He brought a hand forward and traced the rim of his belt buckle, catching momentarily on the edge of some tape.

He’d used this tape to hold together a crack he’d put in his belt buckle months ago. Donnie had dared him into trying a triple backflip off an eighth-story fire escape onto the roof of a shorter building below. Raph had *not* stuck the landing, but the footage on Donnie’s phone of his spectacular wipeout

was so funny Raph hadn't even been mad. He grinned at the memory as he felt the jagged edges of the crack beneath the tape.

The tip of his finger felt a particularly sharp edge through the tape, and suddenly, Raph's hand froze. *All* of him froze. His breath caught in his throat, his smile falling away as quickly as it had come. His eyes fixed on the nothingness that stretched out beyond where he and Leo sat.

"What's up, dude?"

Leo was asking something, but he wasn't listening. With one hand still on the belt buckle, Raph brought the other up to his chest. It hovered there for a moment, the air between his palm and his plastron feeling hot as he hesitated. There were only a few centimeters from his hand and his chest, but the distance felt insurmountable. Why had he reached for it if he didn't want to touch it? *Why* didn't he want to touch it?

"Does your shoulder hurt?"

"…what?" Raph croaked out. His head felt heavy as he turned it to look at Leo.

"A while ago, you said someone, uh, 'fixed' your shoulder. Which I guess means it was hurting or something. I mean, it sure *felt* like it hurt the first time I brought you here. What happened, dude?"

"It's not—"

It's not what? Raph hadn't finished the sentence, because what had he even been trying to say? It had hurt, but it didn't hurt anymore. Why had it hurt, though? What had happened? What was happening *now?* Why was it *so fucking hard* to think here? What was happening to him? What was *happening*—

"Raph? You're kinda freaking me out here, man."

Leo sounded just as scared as Raph felt, and his stomach lurched at the realization of just *how* scared he really was. His gaze had somehow slipped away from Leo to once again to peer into the never-ending emptiness that surrounded them. No matter how much he wanted to, he could not tear his eyes away from it to look at Leo instead.

“C’mon dude, just uh, just breathe, okay?”

Leo reached up to grasp Raph’s upper arm. The motion jostled Raph’s arm, forcing his hand to close the gap between it and his chest. He flinched, expecting…*something*. Something *terrible*. Raph hadn’t even realized he had screwed his eyes shut until they were flying open when shaking fingers splayed out against smooth plastron. Whatever it was that he had been expecting, it wasn’t there.

What *was* there, however, was Leo. Raph’s brother had come to stand in front of him, eyes wide and full of panicked worry. Raph’s mouth opened and closed a few times.

“*Breathe*,” Leo hissed, half begging, half ordering.

Raph complied, finally sucked in a shaking breath. Then another, and another. Leo sagged with relief, finally releasing his death grip on Raph’s arms. Raph hadn’t even noticed how tightly Leo had been holding them. Leo took a couple steps back and looked Raph up and down.

“Sorry,” Raph said breathlessly. “I—I don’t know what just happened.”

“…I think I do,” Leo murmured. He ran a trembling hand over his face before meeting Raph’s eyes again. “That might’ve…I think that might’ve been my fault. I’m sorry.”

Raph didn’t understand. His mind was always fuzzy while visiting Leo, but this was the most disorganized his thoughts had ever been here. Every horrible, terrifying feeling he had experienced was fading away so quickly that after a few more breaths, he wasn’t sure he’d really felt anything at all. Hand still on his plastron, he ran his thumb back and forth across the smooth surface of his scute. The motion was soothing in a way he couldn’t explain. The more he touched it, the calmer he felt.

“What?” Raph asked, blinking at very flustered looking Leo. He didn’t remember what they were talking about…his shoulder, maybe? He didn’t know why, though. His shoulder was fine.

“You were spacing out and that freaked me out, and like…I still don’t really get how this works, but I’m pretty sure we’re in *my* head, so maybe *me* starting to freak out made *you* start, too…”

Huh. Maybe that *did* make sense, because there hadn't even been anything for Raph to freak out over. He'd just gotten lost in the memory of cracking his belt buckle. It was pretty easy for Raph to space out here, after all. And Leo was…well, *Leo*, so of course he got worked up over Raph zoning out for a second. He spread his fingers out against his chest one last time before dropping his hand and grinning at Leo.

"I'm fine, dude. No big deal, okay?" Raph said, giving Leo a light punch on the arm.

"Yeah…" Leo said, still looking a little unsure but clearly relieved Raph seemed alright. Because he *was* alright. Sure, maybe Leo was right and Raph's shoulder *had* hurt a while ago, but it was fine now. Whatever had happened was over, and it really, *really* didn't matter anymore.

Raph stared blankly at the test sheet in front of him. The sounds of pens and pencils scratching against paper filled the classroom, but Raph's own pen was still. He knew he should start filling in answers. He knew there wasn't a single question he couldn't answer correctly. Despite how long he'd been gone, he'd quickly caught up on all the material he missed. He knew the answers. He knew this test was supposed to be important.

He snorted softly to himself at the thought. There was only one thing that was important anymore, and it definitely was not school.

Leo probably would have flipped out if he knew how apathetic Raph felt toward his schoolwork. But Leo *didn't* know, because Leo wasn't here. Which was exactly why Raph was having a hard time giving a shit about Chemistry at the moment.

They had all taken school so seriously once they'd been admitted to Eastman. Mikey might have gotten a little lax about his coursework than the rest of them over time, but even *he* never took school for granted. They had all wanted this so badly. School was normal. That's the whole reason they had wanted to go to school in the first place. But nothing was normal anymore, and everyone acting like things were was driving Raph *up the fucking wall.*

He had quickly learned what happened when he didn't play along, though. If he made a scene, his teachers would pull him aside after classes for "chats". It didn't matter which teacher it was, because they all used the same too-soft, too-sympathetic tone. It was so unbearable that Raph almost always ended up snapping at them. If they didn't feel so bad for him over his "dead" brother and his injury, Raph's attitude probably would've earned himself more than a few detentions by now.

The guilt over being here while Leo was still missing was eating him alive, but Raph understood he had to at least *look* like he still cared. If he didn't, someone might catch on to what he was *really* putting his time and energy into these days. No, he couldn't let anyone know that every ounce of his mental bandwidth not spent on keeping up appearances at school was dedicated to the search.

If nobody else was going to keep looking for Leo, Raph was just going to have to do it himself.

It had begun as soon as he had come home from the hospital. With how wide a berth everyone at home was giving him, it was pretty easy for Raph to sneak out after everyone went to bed. The *real* challenge was getting enough sleep. He was sure that if anything got him caught, it would be not having the energy to function at school.

Raph had started sneaking naps in during his free period. Sometimes he even ate lunch quickly so he could squeeze in another in the library during the remainder of the lunch break. People were obviously nervous to do anything that might "set him off" now, so if anyone thought his new nap habit was weird, they weren't going to bother him about it. Raph had never really been the kind of person to take naps in the middle of the day, but they were necessary if he was going to keep this going.

And as much as he hated it, as much of a waste of time this all was, keeping his grades up in school was a necessary part of the plan. Maybe Raph didn't have Mikey's acting chops, but that didn't really matter since hardly anyone was talking to him anyway. He didn't really need to act engaged or interested in class, either. All he had to do was get good enough grades that he didn't raise any suspicions.

Raph picked up his pen. He'd take this test. He'd do the homework. He'd go through the motions. He'd do what he needed to do. Whatever he needed to do. Leo was counting on him, and that was all that mattered.

"I'm gonna kill Cynthia when I find you," Raph told Leo.

"I don't see her much, honestly," Leo shrugged. "There's other scientists. Like underlings or whatever. Cynthia just shows up to yell at them sometimes before they start the milking."

Raph wasn't sure how many times Leo had been milked at this point. He just knew that he always sat with Leo afterward, like last night. At least, he thought it had been last night. Leo was sitting up now, but he looked completely worn out.

Leo went quiet for a while.

"Sometimes I think I hate them even more than Cynthia."

"Why?"

"Because at least Cynthia *talked* to us."

"What do you mean?"

Leo rubbed his own arms for a moment. Raph was surprised how angry Leo's expression became as he finally answered.

"They act like I'm just some…some lab rat or something. They don't talk to me. They just talk *about* me. Like I can't understand them, or like I'm not even there."

"I know you're here," Raph said, hoping it would make Leo less angry. Raph had seen Leo angry plenty of times. But *this* anger didn't look right on Leo's face. It made Raph…uncomfortable. He wanted it to go away. "I'll talk to you."

"Yeah…I know. Thanks, Raph."

Before they'd stopped visiting him back at the hospital, Donnie and Mikey had told Raph that the feds had questioned them. They'd wanted to know if they had any information they thought might help in

the search for Leo. That was when they'd finally revealed to the humans how their family had been navigating the subterranean maze of New York for the past 15 years.

There were no street names or landmarks underground, so Splinter had needed to come up with his own way of knowing exactly where they were as they traveled through the city to scavenge. As paranoid as Splinter was about humans finding them, he had devised a system that only he and his sons would recognize and understand.

Most of it was trash. Humans didn't just *overlook* trash; they actively tried to ignore it. So, Splinter had reasoned that trash was the perfect tool to use for markers. Over the years, he had carefully marked paths through the sewers, subway tunnels, and other underground utility corridors with pieces of garbage that only meant something if you knew *exactly* what to look for.

A soda can set on top of a joint where two sections of pipe were held together meant "go right". A discarded shoe placed on top of an electrical box meant "go left". Sometimes a plastic bag hung off a pipe valve *also* meant "go left", or an empty Chinese takeout box set on its side on the floor meant "go right". There were so many different pieces of trash and things they could mean that sometimes Raph forgot what certain markers even were.

Not Leo, though. They were all scared of humans back then, but after Splinter himself, Leo had been the *most* scared. He always listened intently whenever Splinter explained something about his excessively complex system. Not even Donnie was as good at keeping track of the markers and their meanings as Leo was.

Splinter had started letting his sons go on errands once they were old enough. In the beginning, Raph and his brothers had obediently followed the markers set out for them. They grew bolder with each successful outing without their dad, and soon enough, they started finding their own paths to new places. Leo had been meticulous about marking each new route with Splinter's system for a while, but the older and more confident they all became, the less they relied on markers. When they finally started venturing out to the surface behind their dad's back, they abandoned the system entirely.

The authorities all agreed that Leo had most likely been given instructions through his hacked earpiece to enter the sewers, and that his kidnapper had him travel to another location. Unlike the surface where there were security cameras on every storefront and doorbell cameras on every residence, the sewers had no surveillance systems. By having him go underground and abandoning his phone, Leo's kidnapper had forced him off the grid.

But even with all that foresight, there was no way whoever took him could have known about the marker system.

"Holy shit," Raph had gasped, propped up in his hospital bed as Donnie and Mikey told him what they'd explained to the authorities. *"They think Leo might've left markers."*

"Yeah, that's their working theory right now," Donnie had said.

*"I mean, Leo **was** obsessed with it when we were little,"* Mikey had chimed in eagerly. *"He totally could've like, left a trail for us to follow."*

"Plus, we're literally ninjas," Donnie had added. *"Even if the kidnapper met him down there, which they don't think is what happened, Leo could probably set something up super stealthily without being noticed. And if he was alone, it would've been way easier to leave clues. They have search teams spreading out in each direction from the spot he went underground at. We told them all the different stuff that could be markers and everything, but dad's still down there looking at all the trash they find to see if it's something Leo left or just, y'know…actual trash."*

It was a good theory, but in the end, the authorities had decided that was *all* it was. Nothing they found ended up being a marker. Splinter had reviewed every single piece of garbage the search teams found, either in person or from photos, and none of them meant anything.

But in the couple of months since the parade, Raph had become more and more convinced that they had missed something. That *Splinter* had missed something.

As much as Raph didn't like to think about it, his dad was getting old. He'd been wearing glasses for years now. Not only that, but the handful of times he saw his dad during the search, he'd looked absolutely exhausted. Between his fading eyesight and declining stamina, Splinter very easily could have overlooked something critical.

This was now Raph's *own* working theory. A theory he'd been putting to the test almost every night since he came home from the hospital. A theory that, paradoxically, felt more and more likely the longer he searched without any results. It didn't matter how many nights he came home empty handed. He wasn't going to stop. He wasn't going to give up. Not like the cops had. Not like Splinter had.

No, Raph wasn't going to get discouraged. Because each time he finally made it back to his room and crawled into bed for an hour or two of sleep before school, he could feel it. Leo was waiting for him. Calling him.

And no matter what, Raph was going to answer.

Leo was rubbing his shoulder.

"What's wrong? Milking?" Raph asked, taking a seat on the floor across from his brother. Looking at him, Raph was pretty sure Leo hadn't been milked in a while. It always took him a few days to feel better after it happened, and Raph just sat with him until he did. But as far as Raph could remember, lately they'd just been…hanging out.

"No, they did something different today. It was…weird."

"I mean, *milking* is pretty weird," Raph shrugged.

Leo laughed. "Yeah okay, good point."

"So, what'd they do?"

"They made me fight these crazy robots in this big room," Leo told him. "Seriously, it was *so* insane, dude. They seemed so real, I thought they were actual people for a minute. They had like, ninja outfits on, so I couldn't tell they were robots until I hit one."

"Whoa."

"Yeah. It was like something out of a movie or a video game, man. Donnie and Mikey probably would've thought it was awesome. Not the whole kidnapped-and-forced-to-fight thing, I mean. Just the robots. You *definitely* would've loved getting to wreck those things."

Raph snorted out a little chuckle through his grin. Getting to go all out in a fight without worrying about accidentally killing someone *did* sound pretty fun.

“And I won’t lie, I’m pretty sore but it *was* kinda nice to move around like that in a big open space. I’m getting so, like…*restless* in here, man…I’ve been trying to exercise, y’know? For something to do *and* so I’m still in shape in case there’s ever, like, an actual chance to escape. I keep trying to practice katas and stuff, but there’s not a lot of room in here…”

“I getcha,” Raph shrugged. Leo didn’t have to justify anything to him. Wherever Leo was, Raph understood that it was mind-numbingly boring.

Leo always asked a lot of questions about what was happening in the real world when he brought Raph here, but sometimes it was difficult for Raph to think of what to tell him. He could tell Leo sometimes got frustrated with how little he had to say, even if he always swore that he just appreciated Raph’s company.

After sitting in this room day after day with nothing but the occasional lackluster conversation for something to do, Raph supposed getting to leave and get some exercise *would* be nice. Even if that exercise was fighting some evil ninja robots.

“I’m pretty sure they were using them to test me. Or like, observe me or something. There were a *butt load* of cameras in there. Pretty sure all the robots had cameras, too.”

“What are they looking for?”

“I don’t know,” Leo shrugged. “But if it’s a choice between the milking or the robots, I’ll *totally* take the robots.”

Raph wasn’t being as careful as he should have been as he crept through the Lair toward his room. His feet dragged a little more with every step, and the aching throb in his shoulder made it harder to ignore how long he’d been out. It didn’t bother him anymore, but he’d *really* overdone it tonight. He’d lost track of time, and once he realized the sky above the storm drain grates had started to lighten, he’d doubled back fast as he could.

The Lair was dark except for a dim light left on in the kitchen. He squinted toward the living room area as he moved past, barely making out the shape of Splinter’s chair in the shadows.

Raph froze. The chair wasn't empty. He could see the back of Splinter's ears poking up above the top of it.

Fuck.

Splinter was supposed to be asleep. He was *never* up this early. How long had he been sitting out here?

Raph didn't wait to find out. There was no way Splinter hadn't just heard him. In fact, Raph was pretty sure he saw one of his ears twitch. The best move now would be to act as if he wasn't trying to sneak through the Lair. If he stopped trying to be stealthy, maybe Splinter would think Raph was just on his way back from the bathroom or something. He hoped it worked. He *needed* it to work.

Raph tried to ignore how hard his heart was pounding as he clicked his bedroom door shut.

Raph looked down at his brother, and Leo looked back at him from his spot on the floor. He had a terrible bruise on his forearm that was only slightly worse than his black eye. There were a couple scuffs on his plastron that were definitely going to take a while to go away completely. He had one knee elevated, and Raph could tell from the swelling that it really, *really* had to hurt.

"Okay, I take it back," Leo said with an exhausted little chuckle and sheepish grin. "*Screw* the robots, dude."

Raph had stayed home for a couple nights after his close call with Splinter. Leo couldn't afford for him to sit out the search for too long, though, so Raph had checked and double checked that everyone was asleep before slipping out a few hours earlier. He didn't stay out as long as he would have wanted, either, but he didn't want to push his luck. He knew that he had anyway the second he made it back home.

"Where were you?"

Fuckfuckfukfuckfuckfuckfuuuuuuuck!

Splinter clicked the lamp on. He'd moved his chair to face the entrance of the Lair, and Raph could see every line on his tired face. Raph's chest was tight, but he forced an answer.

"Out."

"Out where?"

Raph didn't respond, his jaw clenching as he looked away to avoid his father's gaze. He didn't have the energy for this.

"I've been worried," Splinter continued, his voice rising slightly.

Raph scoffed, the sound bitter in his throat. Splinter's expression hardened, a flicker of anger crossing his face.

"What have you been doing, Raphael?" he demanded, his voice tense. "Don't lie to me."

Raph didn't even try to suppress the snarl that overtook his face at those words. He wasn't a *liar*.

"I've been doing what *you* should've been doing this whole time," he snapped.

Splinter blinked at him. His face didn't change, but something in the air did. The tension that always sat between them thickened instantly.

"I have done *everything* I can," Splinter said in a low, furious tone just barely above a whisper. "I went with the humans to look *every day*. I looked at everything, and there was *nothing*. There *is* nothing."

“You’re wrong—” Raph began, but Splinter was on his feet now.

“You are reckless, Raphael! You do not think about consequences! You *never* have. Not like your brother.”

Raph saw Splinter’s eyes flick to the scar on his plastron. Not the one from the bullet, but the one from Leo.

He could still remember the way Leo’s hands had shaken after he accidentally cut Raph with his katanas. How quiet he had gotten after it happened. How long it took Leo to find the courage to spar against him again. How the guilt had looked on his face.

When Leo had trapped Raph on the float, he’d seen that same guilt again. The memory of Leo’s terrified face left Raph’s throat closing up.

“What you are doing is not helping him. It is only hurting you.”

“I’m *fine*,” Raph bit out past the lump in his throat.

“*You are not,*” Splinter shot back. “You cannot keep doing this! You did not think at the parade, and you were hurt! How can you not see that this is the same?”

Raph opened his mouth to say something, *anything*, but the lump in his throat had become a vice. He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t even look at Splinter.

He turned on his heel with his fists clenched at his sides and stalked off toward his room. Splinter was right about one thing; Raph *didn’t* care about the consequences. So what if his dad or his brothers and everyone else thought he was crazy? So what if they believed he was just delusional? Once he found Leo and brought him home, *none* of this would matter, and everything...everything would be fine.

“Raph?” Leo said softly, sounding hesitant. “…is this okay?”

“Is what okay?”

“Me bringing you here. I don’t want to bother you with my uh…whole situation.”

Raph’s reply was instant.

“You’re not bothering me.”

“You sure? You seem like, pretty down or something lately…”

Again, Raph answered immediately.

“I’m fine.”

“Uh, you forget the part where I’m an empath? Or that we’re literally sitting in my weird psychic headspace or whatever?” Leo said with a grin and skeptically raised brow.

“It’s just…hard. You not being around at home.”

“I’m sorry,” Leo said in a small voice. “Are, uh…you and Dad okay?”

Raph’s chest tightened sharply, and Leo’s hand flew up to grasp at his own plastron. Their eyes met, and Raph knew that Leo could feel Raph’s constricting heart as if it were his own.

“Okay, gonna take that as a ‘no’,” Leo choked out. “It’s *that* bad?”

“…I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Okay,” Leo, nodding quickly. “Okay, that’s cool. We don’t have to.”

Raph was surprised. He would’ve expected Leo to press the issue and try harder to get Raph to open up. Leo must have felt his confusion over the subject being dropped so easily. His brother looked nervous as he continued.

“I still don’t really understand how this all works, but I’ve noticed that when you, uh…when you, uh…when you get, like…*upset*, it’s harder to keep you here. And I don’t want you to leave yet, so we can just talk about something else.”

“Oh,” Raph said. He knew Leo could sense the shame he felt, but he apologized anyway. “I’m sorry.”

“No, *I’m* sorry,” Leo sighed. “I’m sorry things are so messed up, and I’m sorry I keep bringing you here just because I’m, y’know, bored and lonely. That’s, like…pretty selfish of me.”

“No, it’s not. We’re not meant to be alone.”

Leo made a strange face at that, but unlike his brother, Raph didn’t know what Leo was feeling. He *did* know was that he didn’t want Leo to feel guilty about this.

“I’m serious. You can bring me here whenever.”

“Okay. Thanks, Raph,” Leo sighed. “And…thanks for not making me feel stupid about it.”

Raph didn’t need to be an empath like Leo to be able to figure out that there was more behind that sentence, and he didn’t have to wonder for long what it might be.

“…Eyepatch is a pretty big asshole,” Leo finally mumbled.

“Who would’a thought,” Raph snorted.

“Yeah, right?” Leo chuckled softly. He was quiet for a second before going on. “I wish it didn’t bother me so much. I mean, you’d *think* the milking would be the worst part, but…after it’s over, all I can think about is the stuff he says.”

“What does he say?”

Raph thought for a moment that maybe Leo hadn’t heard him, because there was a long stretch of silence before Leo finally answered.

“I guess I don’t wanna talk about it, either.”

Things had never been more tense in the Lair. Raph was still going out, but he wasn’t even trying to hide it anymore. Splinter had physically tried to stop him, and Raph had just shoved past. Donnie and Mikey knew now, too, and *of course* they were on Splinter’s side.

“Raph, please,” Mikey had begged. *“What if he takes you, too?”*

“He’s not gonna take me,” Raph had scoffed. *“It’s like April said, that asshole only wanted one of us.”*

*“**Forget** about what April said! Dude, you have to stop!”* Donnie had yelled.

“No,” Raph had snarled, wrenching his arm out of Mikey’s grasp and marching out of the Lair.

They’d all still been up when he got back, and Raph had ignored them all on his way to his room. That had been nearly a week ago, and none of them had tried to stop him since. Raph shouldn’t have been surprised. They gave up pretty quickly on Leo, too, after all. At least it made going out to search easier.

Splinter had hardly spoken to or even looked at him for days now, so it was more than a little surprising when he came to Raph’s room. He had his phone in his hand, and Raph could see an active

call on the screen. He held the phone out for Raph to take, and he brought it to his ear in confusion.

“Hello?”

“Raph? Hey buddy, it’s Woody.”

That was definitely Woody, but the usual easygoing tone in his voice was nowhere to be found. When Woody explained what he was calling about, Raph understood why.

The news wasn’t great. Woody had been going through Raph’s scans again. Turtle nerd that he was, apparently he did that a lot. But this time, he’d realized they had missed something. A small shard of his shell was still in the muscle of his shoulder. Raph didn’t understand how it could’ve have been missed by all the doctors after multiple scans while he was still at the hospital, but Woody insisted that it was “like, really, *really* tiny”. But even though it was so small, it still needed to come out. Woody had already talked to Raph’s doctors, and they had him scheduled for surgery later that week.

Raph spent the next few days trying not to psych himself out over it. He’d been assured that since they had more time to prepare a proper sedative, he’d be fully under this time. Somehow, it wasn’t much of a comfort. Raph decided to stay home for a few nights. He wouldn’t have been able to focus, and he might miss something during his search. It wouldn’t be for long, though. As soon as this was over, he’d be back out there.

“They took you because you’re psychic or whatever, right?” Raph asked his brother.

“I mean, it sure seems like it,” Leo shrugged.

“So can you like, read my mind?”

There were times that Leo responded to things that Raph hadn’t said out loud. It had taken Raph a while to notice, but once he had, he realized it was happening more and more frequently when he visited Leo here. Picking up on Raph’s feelings was one thing. Now, though, Leo seemed to be intercepting Raph’s very train of thought.

“Oh…uh, sort of? But I’m not doing it on purpose, I swear!” Leo said anxiously, waving his hands in front of himself. He was almost tripping over himself in his effort to explain. “I don’t really understand how it works. I’m *really* sorry, I know that’s like, super weird and *not* cool, and I’m not trying to invade your privacy or whatever! I’d totally stop it if I could, but most of the time I don’t even *realize* it’s happening…”

“It’s okay,” Raph said. It *was* weird, but did he really have anything to hide from Leo?

“It almost sounds like you’re talking. Like, it’s *that* clear sometimes. But I know you aren’t because your mouth isn’t moving. I couldn’t do this before. Out in the real world, I mean. I could just sorta tell how people were feeling. It’s different in here for some reason.”

“*’The real world’*? You mean this isn’t real?” Raph asked.

“I think it’s real…just a different kind of real.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Honestly? Me neither,” Leo laughed.

Raph knew something was wrong the moment he woke up.

He’d been prepared for the fact that there would some pain after they removed the shard. He could handle it. He’d had worse. *Way* worse.

But the pain was in the wrong place.

It wasn’t in his shoulder where it should have been. It was lower. More centered. It was beneath that one scute they all had, the one they couldn’t reach themselves, they one they all needed help as kids to

clean. Raph's shell was so big now that he kept a scrub brush on a long handle in the shower just to reach it.

He was awake, but he couldn't move. It was just like before, when they'd wanted him to be awake, but not awake enough to fight.

His dad was there. He didn't look at Raph, instead keeping his eyes fixed on the hands folded in his lap. The longer his dad spoke, the more it made sense to Raph why they'd kept him drugged for this conversation. There would have been no other way to keep him quiet long enough for his dad to explain what they had done.

His dad told him there had never been a missed shard. That the story was just the best way to bring Raph in willingly. That the circumstances called for extraordinary measures. That they needed to keep Raph safe from Leo's kidnapper. That they needed to keep Raph safe from *himself.*

"You are not well," Splinter said gravely. "You are…you are still a danger to yourself. You cannot keep disappearing into the city on your own. If you do, the tracker in your shell will tell us. And if you continue…"

Splinter shook his head, like he didn't want to say what he was about to. Raph didn't want him to, either.

"There are places, like a hospital, for young people who are…confused. Who are struggling like you are. You would go and stay there until you are better."

"No," Raph slurred out through the drugs. Did…did he mean a fucking *psych ward?* His dad *couldn't* be serious. "Y-you can't—"

"I can, and I *will*," Splinter snapped. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers, reining himself in. He sighed heavily before continuing. "But only, *only* if you do not stop."

Raph wasn't sure when Splinter had left and Sweater Asshole came in. Raph could only lay there and listen as he regurgitated more of the same bullshit he'd spouted every other time he had come uninvited to Raph's hospital room.

He had something new to say this time, though. Raph was barely listening until he heard the word *medications*.

"This isn't a moral judgement. What you experienced was deeply traumatic, and nobody thinks any less of you for needing a little extra help to get back on your feet. And that's exactly what these medications are meant to do; *help* you. It can take some time to find the right combination or dosage even for humans, and your mutation makes this just a bit tricker. That's why your dad is going to help monitor your intake and their efficacy so we can adjust if necessary."

Raph said nothing. He had closed his eyes, wishing the floor would just swallow him whole.

"Everyone is rooting for you here, Raphael," Sweater Asshole said softly. "We all want to see you find peace, and we all want you to be *safe*. If you follow along with the steps we've laid out in your safety plan, then we can avoid escalating to a higher level of inpatient care."

Raph didn't know how much longer it was before they were helping him up out of bed. He felt like he was watching from somewhere outside of himself as a handful of doctors and nurses bustled around him. He nodded or shook his head mechanically whenever he was asked something.

He returned to himself for only a moment when he recognized a mop of sandy colored hair among the faceless bodies in the room. Woody.

"Fuck you," Raph hissed, low and slurred.

Raph watched with satisfaction as guilt and shame flash across Woody's face. Good. Woody *should* be ashamed. He had been the one bright spot in all of this, the one person who had talked to Raph like he was normal, the one person who made Raph feel like there was a light at the end of this tunnel… and then he'd fucking lied. He'd taken advantage of Raph's trust, and fucking *betrayed* him.

Raph stayed present long enough to see Woody avert his eyes, then slipped back into the haze. He let himself be guided out of the hospital, into a car, and back to the Lair. Raph sat down on the edge of his bed and watched Splinter's feet softly pad toward the hallway, and he held his breath as he heard the bedroom door shut.

He didn't know why he was holding his breath. He didn't know why he couldn't move. He didn't know why any of this had happened.

Yes, you do.

Raph sucked in a sharp, shuddering breath as reality came crashing down. This had all happened because he'd fucked up. He hadn't been careful enough. He'd let Splinter find out that he was sneaking out to search. He should've pretended to stop, he should have lied about it even though he didn't want to, he should have done whatever it took to keep this from happening, because now he couldn't go look for Leo, and—

Oh god. *He couldn't look for Leo.*

If he tried, they'd know. And if they knew, they'd lock him up in some fucking loony bin and he'd be…he'd be alone. And he couldn't be alone. He couldn't do that. He *couldn't.* They weren't supposed to be alone.

But *Leo* was. Leo was still out there, and he *was* alone, and he wasn't supposed to be, and Raph should be looking, but he couldn't, *he couldn't*, he couldn't because he didn't think, he didn't think, *why didn't he fucking* ***think?!***

He was on his side now, whole body taught and shaking, gasping into his pillow, muffling the raspy, silent screams he couldn't stop no matter how tightly he curled in on himself. He couldn't stop the screams, but had to keep quiet so they wouldn't hear. He didn't want them to hear, because he knew they would ignore it, they would ignore him and they wouldn't come, just like before after he'd screamed and cried and begged for them to come but they didn't, they'd leave him alone in here, and he couldn't be alone, but he was, *just like before*, just like he always would be, because he was so fucking broken that he *couldn't even think*, didn't *want* to think, he didn't want to think about this, he didn't want to think about *how* he didn't want to think, or how not wanting to think made him a horrible person, how that meant he deserved to be ignored, how he deserved to be left alone even though he wasn't supposed to be, he *couldn't* be alone, but he *was*, and he didn't want to think about it, so he wouldn't, don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about it, *don't think about it****, don't think about it***

"…Raph? Raph, can you hear me? Raph!"

Raph blinked.

Leo was standing right in front of him.

"Yep, okay, you're definitely hearing me now," Leo said, sounding relieved.

Leo was here.

Right in front of him.

Leo was here.

How was Leo here?

"How'd…you come back?" he asked slowly.

Words were hard. Standing was hard. Was he standing? He didn't know. Thinking was hard, too.

"Back?" Leo said. He sounded confused. Raph didn't know why. It was obvious what he meant. He spelled it out for him anyway.

"You left."

"What? I didn't leave, dude. You were just awake," Leo laughed. "Man…I know you're always a little out of it here, but you're like, *way* out of it tonight."

Raph didn't understand what that meant. It didn't matter. Leo had been gone, and now he was back.

"Gotta show…show Mike 'n Don…show 'em you're back," Raph slurred out. He groped clumsily for Leo's wrist, gripped it as well as he could, and started dragging his brother toward…toward nothing.

Why was there nothing? Where were they? Where were their brothers?

"Whoa! Dude, *what* is up with you right now?" Leo startled, but he didn't pull his arm from Raph's weak grasp.

"What…is this?" Raph wondered out loud. He'd stopped pulling Leo along behind him when he realized there was nowhere to take him. He turned to look at his brother, the only other thing here besides himself. Leo looked back at him with eyes full of confusion—confusion that was quickly turning into concern.

"Dude, do you…holy crap, do you *not remember*?" Leo asked anxiously, all humor in his voice now entirely gone.

Raph didn't know how to answer that. How could he have forgotten something when there wasn't even anything here to remember? Wait, no. That wasn't true. Leo was here. Raph would never forget about Leo. That wasn't…that wasn't even something that was possible. Forgetting Leo would mean he was alone, and they weren't meant to be alone.

But Raph…Raph *had* been alone. He'd been alone in his room. Before then, he'd been alone in a room that wasn't his. And he'd been alone somewhere…somewhere worse. Somewhere deep, somewhere he couldn't—*no, don't think about it.* He had been alone there because…because his brothers left him. Everyone had left him, and Leo…

Leo had been the first to leave him.

"You left," Raph hissed out. He felt his fingers digging into Leo's wrist. "*You left*."

Leo's free hand closed around Raph's forearm, but he didn't try to pry himself free. He saw it in his brother's face when he finally understood what Raph meant.

"Raph, he *made* me."

"*I don't care*," Raph spat. "You left! *YOU LEFT!"*

"I *had* to," Leo pleaded. "All those people…he was gonna *hurt* them."

Raph should care, but he didn't. All he cared about was making Leo *come back*.

"Where are you?" If he knew where Leo was, he could go get him. He *had* to go get him.

"I don't know," Leo said. He sounded as miserable as Raph felt. "I would tell you if I did. We've… we've talked about this, I don't know why you don't remember—"

"Leo," Raph croaked, his throat closing up. "I'm sorry."

“It’s okay! We already knew you don’t remember this when you’re in the real world, but if it’s not even sticking when you’re here, then I gotta be doing *something* wrong…I mean, this is *my* telepathic weirdness, so maybe I just did the meditation wrong or something and it’s like, messing up the connection…It’s not your fault. I’ll…I’ll do better, and you’ll remember next time, okay?”

“No. Not that,” Raph whispered. Leo was wrong. Raph *did* remember something. He had to tell him. He had to tell Leo what he’d done, because he wasn’t a liar. “I messed up.”

He couldn’t say anything else. He didn’t have to, though. He could feel Leo in the edge of his thoughts, patiently waiting for permission he didn’t need. Raph gave it anyway. He tried not to crumble under the weight of his shame as he felt Leo sifting gently through the mess, carefully piecing together what Raph could not. Leo suddenly gasped, and Raph shrank in on himself knowing that Leo finally understood.

Raph had been the only one still looking for him, and now he couldn’t.

Nobody was coming to save him.

Chapter End Notes

Not gonna lie, this chapter is kind of a nothingburger and I kinda just had to throw in the towel and move on...I just want to get back to the fun stuff (torturing Leo).

Next chapter will be the final, final, **FINAL FOR REAL** flashback chapter where Leo slowly loses hope…*and* his mind :) Then we’ll return to the present!

Thank you so so so SO much to everyone who is still here after 7 months of no updates, and to all of the new readers! I don't know where you all came from, but the sudden influx of new kudos/comments/fanart has been *hugely* motivating. THANK YOU!

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